

MRS. BRADLEY SERIES

The
WORSTED
VIPER



GLADYS
MITCHELL

THE WORSTED VIPER

Titles by Gladys Mitchell

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Gladys Mitchell writing as Malcolm Torrie

Heavy as Lead (1966)

Late and Cold (1967)

Your Secret Friend (1968)

Churchyard Salad (1969)

Shades of Darkness (1970)

Bismarck Herrings (1971)

THE WORSTED VIPER

GLADYS MITCHELL

 THOMAS & MERCER

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• CHAPTER 1 •

“So she stood still where she was and waited”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Like most distinguished people, Mrs. Bradley was not unaccustomed to fanmail, often of a peculiar kind. This kind was the anonymous letter. She had received a good many anonymous letters in her time, and therefore was not unduly perturbed to be handed one morning at breakfast, some three years before this story can truly be said to have opened, the following communication:

“Madam (if that is what you call yourself, you old devil), His Majesty’s Pleasure, is it? Ha! Ha! Watch out, you sanctified old she-monster! Stars and stripes, you ruddy female man-eater, we’ll get you where Bone is, you undraped Thessalonian reconstruction. Yah!”

Mrs. Bradley studied it with an appreciative eye. Bone, the murderer (under circumstances which suggested that he was a Satanist) of a woman of the streets, one Minnie Baum, had been saved from the hangman by a verdict of Guilty but Insane, and had been sent to Broadmoor to be detained, in the dignified, obsolete phrase, “during His Majesty’s pleasure.” There appeared to be those who considered his detention unjust.

She passed the letter across the table to her son, who had led for the prosecution during the trial. He studied it, and raised his eyebrows.

“Unusual phraseology, on the whole,” was his comment, as he returned it. Mrs. Bradley laid the missive aside, but with a tender touch. She had been called many things in her time, but had never previously been referred to as an undraped Thessalonian reconstruction. She liked the expression very much.

“It’s inaccurate, though,” said Ferdinand, looking up suddenly from his newspaper as though she had spoken her thoughts. “There’s a reconstructed figure of a goddess from Neolithic Thessaly in terra-cotta in

the National Museum in Athens. It has long, elaborately dressed hair, very broad hips, and a very long neck. It has a large nose, eyes almost on to its forehead, and tremendously bulging thighs.” He glanced at his mother. “The person who wrote the letter has seen either you or the figurine; not both.”

He resumed his reading. His mother continued hers, and her mind was soon busy with matters quite different from anonymous letters; but that night, as she lay in bed, she thought of the letter again, and wondered which friend of the convicted murderer could have written it. Ferdinand dealt with this point, without being asked, next morning. Bone was not married, so the letter was probably from his brother, who had given evidence for the defence and had attempted to create a scene in court when the jury pronounced their verdict.

“But who knew I had anything to do with the case?” asked Mrs. Bradley, who had not attended the trial; her only interest in it had been that her special knowledge of the behaviour and customs of Satanists had led to the arrest of the murderer, but her name had never been mentioned in this connection—at least, not publicly.

The case had been a sordid one, even of its kind. The dead woman, who was known to the police both in her professional capacity and as a twice-convicted thief, had been found dead in the basement of an empty house in South London, far from her home or her haunts.

She had been identified by a number of persons, but none of these attempted to account for her having been in South London. It proved later, however, that, as she had served two sentences for theft, the police believed that she and a partner might have quarrelled over the share-out of the results of a third burglary. Only one blow, in the opinion of the doctors, had been struck by her assailant, but this blow had shattered the base of the skull.

She lay as she had fallen, and the only clue had been a very unpleasant little object picked up on the hearth of the room in which she had been found.

This was a toad, mummified and pinned out on a piece of wood in the shape of a cross. It was an obscene and evil thing, and was produced at the trial for examination by the jury, one of whom, a Catholic, crossed himself hastily at sight of it, and refused to touch it.

Ferdinand, who seldom discussed his work, had told his mother of this discovery, and it had interested her sufficiently for her to suggest that the police ought to try to find out whether a certain figure (she sketched it and

passed it across the table) of asymmetrical shape had been drawn on the floor of the room in which the body had lain. The figure was a pentagram within a couple of concentric circles.

It was this mild suggestion of hers which had led to Bone's arrest, for a young and earnest constable, anxious for—and deserving of—the promotion which he obtained in consequence of giving proof that he had a good memory and powers of intelligent observation, recollected having seen such a demoniac sign on the first floor of a building in which a rather eccentric club had been raided some time previously.

Bone was a member of this club, and from this fact the police could prove an association with the murdered woman. The Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard, having rounded up the members, broke down the alibi, which Bone tried to prove for the night of the murder, charged him, and took him into custody.

Then one of his associates, a renegade Jew named Salstein, told the police that he “guessed Bone had been hexed.” He could not translate nor explain the word to the complete satisfaction of the police, so another member of the club was called in. His version was that “hex” was a form of hypnotism, and was used for evil purposes.

Mrs. Bradley's suggestion to her son, when he came to her for an exposition of the peculiar properties of “hex” and “hex-doctors,” was that “hex” constituted a poor defence in a case of murder, or, indeed, in the commission of any serious wrong-doing, since the scientific study of hypnotism had convinced her that it was not possible to cause a person under the influence of hypnosis to perform any act which that person subconsciously believed to be wrong.

If Bone had been “hexed” it was perfectly certain that he must have had the will to commit murder. Psychologically, the point permitted no doubt.

That there were persons known as “hex-doctors” in certain remote districts of the United States she readily admitted, and recounted stories of some of their deeds. Their power, she thought, derived partly from a knowledge of West Indian negro magic and partly from the superstitions of a population recruited largely from Central Europe, where belief in witchcraft was strong.

At the trial it was readily shown that Bone had been a man who certainly would not have met Minnie Baum in order to share with her the

proceeds of burglary, and the prosecution, led by Ferdinand, therefore took the line that he had killed the woman in order to obtain what the newspapers, in headlines, later called Sensation. The case, in America, of the dissolute and depraved youths Loeb and Leopold was recalled to the minds of the jury, in a masterly analysis, by Ferdinand, but he realised that unless he could show a more substantial motive, a conviction would be difficult to obtain.

The defence were too shrewd—or too orthodox—to attempt to show that the accused man had been hypnotised into killing Minnie Baum. They denied murder, but pleaded Bone guilty of manslaughter. They attempted to show that a struggle had taken place, and argued that the woman had attacked the prisoner and had been killed whilst fighting with him.

The jury's verdict of Guilty but Insane was a surprise, Ferdinand afterwards confessed. On the evidence, he had scarcely hoped for a conviction.

Two years passed, and at the end of them Mrs. Bradley had almost forgotten Bone's name; but not quite. Ferdinand, visiting her again, this time with his wife and little son, happened to observe that Bone was dead.

"Bone?" said Mrs. Bradley, searching her memory. "Oh, of course, yes. The man who went to Broadmoor. Guilty, but insane." She grinned, mirthlessly. "All murderers are guilty but insane. Murder is an insane act. So he's dead? How did it happen? An accident?"

"Yes. He was a hæmophile it seems. Contrived to cut himself on a gardening implement—edge of a hoe, they say—and died because no one could stop the bleeding. Suicide, most likely. He was never allowed within miles of anything sharp, so he must have got hold of the tool without permission."

"Yes, they're very careful," said Mrs. Bradley, gazing absently at a letter beside her plate. The handwriting seemed, not familiar, but capable of stirring some chord of memory. She slit open the envelope. The postmark was Norwich, and the letter ran:

"So Bone is dead. Well, well, well."

"Now, that's what I *call* a threat," said Mrs. Bradley, putting it back into its envelope. A year passed, however, and nothing came of the threat, if threat it was. Only one other curious little fact emerged. It was supplied by Ferdinand, some weeks later, when Mrs. Bradley was visiting him and his wife.

“By the way,” he said, “queer that those Bone brothers should have died within a week of one another.”

“Did they?” asked Mrs. Bradley, and quoted the second anonymous letter she had received, and gave the date.

“Bone must have passed on the vendetta, then,” said Ferdinand, knitting his brows. “He died six days before the chap in Broadmoor. Where did the letter come from?”

“Norwich,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“Well, it couldn’t have come from this brother, if he wrote the other. Besides, they’re London people.”

“The same person wrote both letters,” said Mrs. Bradley.

• CHAPTER 2 •

“The horror of that moment,” the King went on, “I shall never, never forget!”

“You will, though,” the Queen said, “if you don’t make a memorandum of it.”

—From *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* by Lewis Carroll.

So far as Mrs. Bradley was concerned, the threat—for threat it was—ripened with the visit of Amos Bleriot to her consulting room one Tuesday morning in about the middle of May.

The appointment had been made over the telephone, and Mrs. Bradley had no clue whatever to the nature of her patient’s disease beyond the fact that it must be psychopathic. Needless to say, at that time she did not connect him with anonymous threats.

She had been very busy during the early summer, but the addition of a name to her casebook was always an interesting matter, and she found herself looking forward to the visit and was pleased to find the patient punctual.

He was shown into the consulting room at one minute past ten, and proved to be a strongly built man in the middle fifties with light eyes and a small brown beard. He wore a tweed suit and heavy boots, and his movements were sufficiently clumsy to betray that lack of co-ordination between brain and motor reflexes by which it was always possible to diagnose some degree of mental instability.

Mrs. Bradley invited him to sit down, and began to discuss the weather.

“Yes, yes, doctor,” said he. “But do let us come to the point! I have to get my lunch at twelve, or I am no good for the rest of the day.”

“Very well,” said the psychoanalyst. “State your difficulties.”

“My first difficulty,” pronounced the patient, rubbing his nose and then irritably scratching his knee, “was to find a suitable person to consult. I went to B.... You know B..., I suppose?”

“I know several B’s,” Mrs. Bradley responded, with a hoot of laughter, which seemed to surprise the patient.

“I don’t care to mention names,” said he, with a glance towards the door. “At any rate, B...was of no use to me. You see, I am obsessed.”

He rubbed his brow, licked all round his lips and appeared to be trying to catch a flea in the sleeve of his jacket. Mrs. Bradley made a note on the pad before her.

“Obsessed. Yes?” she said encouragingly.

“I am a poet.”

“Really?”

“That is—I *was* a poet. Now I find myself demoded, old-fashioned, out of date, a laughing-stock to my contemporaries, who have all moved forward with the times, and an anachronism to students of modern poetic thought.”

“Yes?”

“My imagery is that of the nineteen-twenties; my subject matter is in keeping. I belong to the Drains Era. You know my early work, no doubt? Some of it is extremely fine. Interesting even now as a survival, it will take its place in its own time. I cannot but admire it. The *Ode to a Butcher’s Slab*—perfect, although, as I say, completely out of date. The sonnet-sequence which begins ‘Blear blood uncoop toward ap Howell lay’—superb, but hopelessly behind the times.” He sighed heavily. “It was,” he continued sadly, “in the year 1928 that I began to suffer from arrested development. I trace it all back to a certain night in March of that year, when I dined with M....At first I was interested, but by the summer of 1929 I had become alarmed. I changed my venue, I made new friends (although all human contacts are most disagreeable to me), I even tried keeping pets. All this had the very worst effect. To begin with, it appeared to disconcert my Muse, who not only eluded me for months at a time, but when she returned only inspired me to such post-war heresies as the lyric (praised by some, but to me complete anathema) ‘Plum, spew thy gore, bright cherry spit thy lung.’ I then went on in the manner of the earlier Georgians—”

“What was the metre of your Ode?” Mrs. Bradley enquired, interrupting what seemed to be an eternal flow. The poet gazed at her

vacantly. She repeated the question, and his gaze changed to an expression of cautious respect.

“Iambic pentameters, of course,” he answered bitterly. “I am absolutely haunted by the things.”

“How do you account for that, I wonder?”

“It is all the same trouble. It is what one of my friends, a man named X..., you must forgive these abbreviations. It is not that I don’t trust you with the truth, but I never know who might be listening—it is what X calls being fossilised in a stratum of my own subconscious mind.”

“I congratulate him,” Mrs. Bradley said, with a grin, which caused the patient to bite his tongue. “But I don’t see how I can help you. I have never heard of the rejuvenation or the resurrection of a fossil.”

“No?” said the patient, performing ape-like antics on his left ribs underneath his arm. He seemed completely at a loss for a moment; so much so that Mrs. Bradley added pleasantly,

“I can give you the usual tests, if you like, but what you really want is to apprentice yourself to a butcher; a country butcher, if possible. One who does his own slaughtering.”

“I fail to see how that would help me, although, of course, I could try it. It does not sound very practical.”

“It would sublimate your preoccupation with blood, and the rhythm of chopping the meat would exorcise this bogey of iambics. I have listened to many butchers chopping meat; not one chopped it to the metre of a Shakespeare sonnet. That will be fifteen guineas, please.”

“Without the tests you mentioned?” enquired the patient, who did not appear to be unduly elated or impressed by the prescription.

“Oh, no. You may have the tests, by all means. In fact, it would interest me to give them. I make a point, however, of warning patients of your type, Mr. Bleriot, that, while these tests may be useful to me and to society, they may end by causing discomfort or even danger to their subject.”

“How could they harm me?” demanded the patient loudly, looking extremely and rationally alarmed.

“If I could tell you that before I make them, I should have no need to make them at all,” the sharp-eyed old woman pointed out. “The risk is yours. For instance”—she glanced at him meaningfully—“I might have to

recommend your removal to a mental hospital. What do you think about that?"

"Oh, I'll risk that," said Bleriot, his alarm giving place to a smirk or, apparently, self-congratulation.

"Or to prison," continued the psychoanalyst. "Cross your legs, please....Now seat yourself in this revolving chair....And now a few questions and answers. Please write down the first word which comes into your head...."

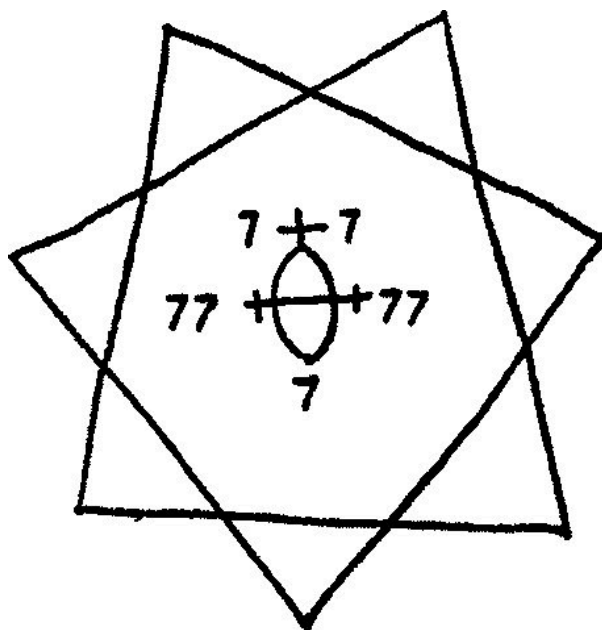
Further tests included some juggling with jigsaw puzzles and the recitation of half-a-dozen tongue-twisters. Then the poet was supplied with a set of six shiny-surfaced blank cards and was asked to turn them, with the assistance of red and black ink, into playing cards. Ignoring the red ink completely, he made, very painstakingly, a King, and a Knave of Clubs, an Ace of Spades, an Ace of Clubs, and then, to Mrs. Bradley's growing interest, commenced to draw a Heart, but still used the black ink. He placed this shape in the top left-hand corner of the fifth, partly shaded it in with strokes of the pen, then paused, looked at it doubtfully, glanced up at her, bit his lip, and said, with the manner of a child, "Oh, no. That's wrong."

He put the spoilt card aside and took the remaining blank one.

"It doesn't matter," said Mrs. Bradley, taking it gently from him. "That will do very nicely."

"But this is important," said he, like a child who has been bidden to put away his toys and go to bed. "Just let me—"

He took the card from her yellow fingers but, instead of drawing a Heart again, he made the sinister and ridiculous magic symbol of:



“Do you know what that is?” he enquired, gazing at his handiwork with considerable pleasure.

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Bradley replied.

“Ah. Watch your step, then,” observed Amos Bleriot. “It isn’t everyone who knows the sign of Master Therion.”

“Rubbish,” said Mrs. Bradley; although whether she referred to the sign of Master Therion or to the theory that not everyone knew it, her listener did not enquire. She went on briskly, without giving him the opportunity to make an observation. “For one thing, you haven’t finished it. Never mind. Don’t forget the prescription, and do let me know how you get on. Sign the book, please.”

“Sign? What for?” enquired the patient, getting up. He sat down again rather heavily, however, as Mrs. Bradley pushed him back into his chair.

“Police regulations,” said she; and put the pen into his hand. “Do you drink?” she enquired bluntly, when he had signed. The poet shook his head, and wrinkled his nose.

“I am a total abstainer both from alcohol and nicotine,” he answered. “I should add that I have no sex life.”

He seemed surprised when Mrs. Bradley recoiled from this offensive description of an only partially functioning ego, and took his leave with some abruptness, glancing at his wristwatch and muttering, “Protein! Protein!” as he shambled out through the doorway.

Mrs. Bradley went to the drawing-room window, from which she could see the street, for it was in her Kensington house that she had interviewed the patient. She was interested to notice that he stepped out with long, easy strides, which took twenty years off his age, hailed a taxi at the corner, and entered it with none of the abnormal moppings and mowings to which he had treated her during the consultation.

“Hm!” she said aloud, as she descended the stairs; and added, within herself, “Now what is your game, my friend?”

She looked up his name in the telephone directory, for he had given a London address, but not only was there not the name of Bleriot opposite any such address, but when, after two hours of careful searching of the directory, she located the telephone number of the address he had given, and had rung up the inhabitants of the house, it was only to discover (not at all to her surprise) that no one named Bleriot lived there or was known to the people.

She studied his signature in her book, but the writing was quite unknown to her.

She recounted the story at dinner that night to her nephew, Jonathan Bradley, and his wife Deborah.

“What’s the idea, I wonder?” Jonathan observed.

“Something fishy is usually something criminal,” said Mrs. Bradley, speaking from wide experience. “But I confess I can’t determine what our friend expected to gain from having visited me this morning.” It was not until later that she began to connect Amos Bleriot with the criminal lunatic Bone.

“Whatever it was, the question is, did he gain it?” Jonathan enquired.

“Well,” said Mrs. Bradley, fixing her brilliant eyes on the questioner, “that is the most intriguing point of all. From his jaunty way of walking to the corner of the street, I rather fancy that he did. I wish I knew what it was. I’ve thought about it during all the time that has elapsed since his departure, but I can’t come to any conclusion.”

“I don’t think I understand what you’re talking about,” said Deborah. “Surely, if the man is really afflicted, his—his illness might cause him to give a wrong address and that sort of thing?”

“Unlikely,” said Jonathan, before his aunt could speak. “You will find that the worst mental defective (and this man is far from that!) usually knows where he lives.”

“The point is,” said Mrs. Bradley, “that Amos Bleriot is as sound, mentally, as any of the three of us here—although that may not be saying much! He was acting a part—and overdoing it, too. And he gave me a solemn warning, which on the face of it seems friendly. What do you make of this?”

She produced, but would not let them handle, Mr. Bleriot’s last and strangest card.

“But Master Therion,” said Jonathan, “only worked white magic, didn’t he? Wasn’t there a case about him in the paper years ago?”

“Yes, there was. And he did claim only to work white magic. But the sign, you see, is unfinished, and so little do I trust my sinister patient, that I feel there is a warning, even in that, beyond the warning I received to watch my step.”

• CHAPTER 3 •

“If everybody minded their own business,” said the Duchess, in a hoarse growl, “the world would go round a great deal faster than it does.”

“Which would *not* be an advantage,” said Alice.

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Ten weeks and two hours passed, and one brilliant Tuesday morning near the end of July Mrs. Bradley was finishing lunch when a telegram was brought in.

“No reply, Célestine,” she said. She glanced up at the maid. “Do you know what one of his landladies said about the late George Joseph Smith?” she demanded.

“Non, madame.”

“Being respectable, why should you? She said—in fact she went so far as to write it down in a postcard which bore his address—‘Wife died in bath. We shall see him again.’ What do you think of that?”

“Did they see him again, madame?”

“Yes. In the dock at the Old Bailey.”

When the maid had gone, Mrs. Bradley reread the telegram.

“Hold horses Broads stop see morning paper also Bleriot,” it commanded. At that moment the telephone rang.

“Scotland Yard, madame,” announced Célestine.

“All right. I’ll take it in here.”

“Detective Inspector Pirberry,” said the telephone. “That loony you put us on to, mam, has given the locals the slip, and, following his disappearance, there’s been a very unpleasant murder.”

“What locals would those be, Inspector?”

“The City of Norwich police, mam. This Amos Bleriot has been living in one of the old hotels in Norwich, and he’s hopped it. It’s true he’s paid his bill, but he hasn’t left any address. Of course, there’s nothing much they

can do, as they've never had any official reason for keeping an eye on him, but in view of what you told us they're going to have a look for him, especially considering what's happened. I suppose you've seen the morning papers?"

Mrs. Bradley had seen the morning papers. She called for a telegraph form, having changed her mind, after all, about sending a reply.

"Wire received objection sustained," she wrote, and addressed it to her nephew Jonathan. She sent George, the chauffeur, out with it, and he had just disappeared down the street on his way to the telegraph office when the postman left the second delivery of letters. There were four letters, all interesting, especially the last that she opened. She had left it until the last because, although she felt there was something familiar about the handwriting, she could not call to mind whose writing it was.

The postmark had its own interest, in view of the telephone message from Detective Inspector Pirberry, for it was Norwich.

Mrs. Bradley opened it and glanced first at the signature. She clicked her tongue at it, and then read the letter, which was short and to the point.

"Dear Mrs. Bradley,

"We have got ourselves mixed up in what seems to be a murder. Could you possibly advise us what to do? We are on holiday here, on the Broads, in a motorboat, just the three of us, and we were the people to discover a dead body, in a rather lonely part, on Sunday morning. I expect the papers will have all about it by the time you get this. We don't quite know what our position is, as we have been told we must keep in touch with the police and also attend the inquest. It is all rather upsetting, and Laura Menzies and Kitty Trevelyan didn't want me to write, but I felt you would advise us. Please forgive me for troubling you, but there is no one else who could possibly help us in this.

"Yours sincerely,

"Alice Boorman."

Mrs. Bradley put the letter back into its envelope and sent Célestine to pack a suitcase. The three girls were not related to her, but she had had them in her charge whilst she had acted as Warden of a Hall of Residence at Cartaret Training College, and had bade them goodbye, with considerable regret, at the end of the summer term. Besides, it gave her an excellent excuse to go to the Broads, after all.

She rang up Scotland Yard and asked to be connected with Detective Inspector Pirberry.

"I've heard from the girls who discovered the body," she said. "Now, Inspector, I want an introduction to the Norwich police."

"I'll tell the superintendent you'll be along, mam. It's rather an interesting case, and I shouldn't be surprised if it's in our hands before long. They can't identify the body."

"Not a local person?"

"That seems pretty certain."

"And you feel that an unidentifiable corpse is likely to be from London?"

"Well, stranger things have been known, mam, and there are a rare number of London people on holiday just now. You get down to Norwich when you like, mam. We'll see that they're ready to receive you."

George took the car, with Mrs. Bradley in it, by way of Romford, Brentwood, Chelmsford, Braintree, and Thetford. From Thetford it seemed no distance to Wymondham and on to Norwich.

Mrs. Bradley had booked a room at a hotel at the north end of Tombland, a beautiful old fifteenth-century house, which she had selected because, it appeared, Amos Bleriot had been staying there up to the time of his disappearance.

She made no enquiries about him, however, having resolved to hear first what the Norwich police had to say. She rang them up from the hotel, and was invited by the superintendent to come round at her convenience for a talk.

She enquired about the students, and produced the letter she had received from Alice Boorman. The superintendent read the letter carefully, and handed it back. He had the typical, deliberate, rather sing-song speech of the county, and his promotions had not had the effect of altering his verbs, which he rendered, in the country-fashion of the locality, almost all in the present tense and in the singular.

"That do seem a very proper letter," he observed. "The case, that do be in the hands of Mr. Os. Proper angry that get, when the men do be calling him the wizard. Almost think there might be something in it, that get so mad."

He laughed pleasantly.

"Inspector Os?" asked Mrs. Bradley.

“Aye. That isn’t Norfolk, though.”

“His name doesn’t sound like it, anyhow.”

“Oh, aye, but that’s English enough. Put in on the case as a favour to the Chief Constable. Fancy that as a detective, the Chief Constable do. Os is from further over by the Wash. That don’t belong here in Norwich. But when the body get found, then that seem to be our man, according to the Chief Constable. Not quite fair on my men, that isn’t, but they work in loyal enough.”

“The inspector has seen the body, I presume, then?”

“Aye, that have. According to Mr. Pirberry, you’re a doctor, ma’am. I shall be proud to have your opinion. It seem that might have been murdered, and it seem that might have killed herself. Mr. Os, that’s all for murder. That do see fame ahead of him.”

He laughed again, still pleasantly, but it was clear that he was not altogether in favour of Inspector Os. Possibly the Chief Constable’s favourite was scarcely likely to be a favourite of his, Mrs. Bradley thought, particularly if Os had been put before some of the superintendent’s own men. She felt a certain amount of curiosity concerning Inspector Os, who was intelligent enough, it seemed, to have been brought in over the heads of the strictly local men. As it happened, he came in at that moment, and the introductions were made.

Mrs. Bradley saw a heavy-faced, humourless man, of stolid aspect, with large hands and straight features, solidly built and rather pale. What Inspector Os saw he did not disclose, but no doubt Mrs. Bradley’s yellow skin, black eyes and claw-like hands did not escape his notice, nor the quality of her alligator grin as she said, when they had shaken hands:

“I hear you’re known as the Wizard, Mr. Os.”

Os grunted at, rather than replied to, this attack.

“It seems to me rather a compliment for a police officer,” Mrs. Bradley continued; but it was clear that Os did not think so. “And now, what’s this about my students?”

“Those being the young ladies that hit on the body, I suppose, ma’am?” Mr. Os enquired. “Well, they’re still having their holiday. We’re bound to have them within reach in case we want them for questioning if anything else should come up, so they thought they might as well finish their cruise. Not that we’ve got anything on them at all. I’m certain they are what they seem. What we don’t care much about is this disappearing trick

that seems to have been worked by your Mr. Amos Bleriot, ma'am, in view of the warning you gave, and Inspector Pirberry thought, as you were coming this way, you might give us a pointer or two, as it seems you were wise to this gentleman's tendencies, having reported upon him to Scotland Yard long before anything happened."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bradley. "Of course, Inspector, you do realise that they were *only* tendencies, don't you? He may never have had the urge to put them into practice. But when I get a patient, not, in the accepted sense, insane, but who reacts to psychoanalysis in the way Mr. Bleriot did, I always let Scotland Yard know."

"So Inspector Pirberry said, ma'am. He said that quite a score of murders have been prevented, and more than thirty actual murderers have been tracked down, as a result. Very impressive, ma'am, if I may say so."

The superintendent politely concurred in this view.

"Yes," said Mrs. Bradley, with a slight sigh. "But who am I to interfere with the natural instincts of my fellow human beings?"

"Unnatural instincts, I should have thought, ma'am," the inspector quietly observed.

"No such things, Mr. Os," Mrs. Bradley replied with a cackle. "Where was the body found?"

"The superintendent produced a large-scale map of the district, and the inspector took up a pencil.

"This is the actual place, ma'am, on the shore of a little Broad not more than a hundred yards across, just about midway between Hoveton and Ranworth. It hasn't got a name on the map, but the people in the villages round call it Voley Water. It's got a kind of a funny reputation. Have you heard of the Norfolk evil spirit, ma'am? One of those old tales, you know. Of course, I'm a London man myself, and don't take much stock in local stuff. Well, they call him Old Shuck (although I don't know that anybody much believes in him now, with all this popular education and all that), and he's supposed to be a dog about as big as a calf."

"The Hound of the Baskervilles," said Mrs. Bradley.

"Ah, just about the same," said the superintendent. "Old Shuck keep under the shadow of the hedges, and dog people at night. If he follow you it mean death within the year. He haunt by Barton Broad, and over Cottishall Bridge, and that also claim to haunt at a place called Beeston, near Sheringham over to Overstrand, in the north-east part of the county."

“A wide district for one unfortunate demon to cover,” commented Mrs. Bradley. “The name Shuck comes, I believe, from the Anglo-Saxon for demon?”

“Yes, ma’am, so a learned gentleman told me once,” agreed the inspector, who appeared to regard the superintendent with a kind of conscientious magnanimity which must have been rather trying. “Well, this is the point: just about this time last year some irresponsible sort of people—visitors, no doubt, who’d got to hear of the story—put it about that they’d seen Old Shuck swimming across this very same Voley Water. Now Old Shuck has never been known to *swim*, so far as I am aware, but you know what country people are! There’s always some who are willing to take in anything, and the story got round in no time, when it was known the body had been found. A woman of about thirty-five, ma’am, and, according to the doctor, not one who’d been any better than she should be. Anyway, she was murdered all right. The young ladies were called to the inquest this morning, but, of course, we had to ask for an adjournment. Haven’t even got evidence of identification yet. Nothing but the medical evidence....But I dare say you’d like to hear the young ladies’ story...I’ve got their full statements here....”

He accepted her cooperation, she was interested to notice, without question.

• CHAPTER 4 •

“I *have* tasted eggs, certainly,” said Alice,^{*} who was a very truthful child;
“but little girls eat eggs quite as serpents do, you know.”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

^{*}The fact that the name of one of the characters in this book also happens to be Alice is fortuitous, and has no connection with the chapter headings.—
G.M.

“We’d better check the stores,” said Alice.

“Hot dog,” said Kitty.

“I shouldn’t think she is,” said Alice seriously. “She’s sitting on the roof of the saloon with the owner, and they’re discussing the chart and arguing about draught of water and mooring head to the wind.”

“By ‘hot dog’ I didn’t mean Dog,” explained Kitty; and, having thus readjusted her friend’s mind, she settled with enthusiasm to the contemplation of food.

“You call them out and I’ll write them down,” said Alice, gazing with an aunt-like eye, indulgently, at a vast collection of tins and bottles, which covered the floor and table of the saloon, and overflowed onto the seats.

“What about my shorthand? It would be very much quicker,” said Kitty, who boasted an extraordinary facility in this strange and difficult art.

“Yes, but no one else can read it. Go on. Shout.”

“OK. I say, I feel awfully hungry. Shan’t you be glad when we can make a start on these?”

“You’ve only just had your lunch. And, in any case, you can’t open these until they’re checked. Call them out, please.”

“Tongue, tinned, six; olives, bottled, two; brisket of beef, tinned, four; salmon, red, tall, tinned, six; salmon, red, flat, tinned, twelve—I think; half a second; let me count; right. I can’t think where on earth we’re going to

stow this lot—before we eat it, I mean. Chutney, glass, one; mixed pickles, glass, one; piccalilli, glass, one; vinegar, bottle, pint, one; walnuts, pickled, glass, one—we shall never eat all this stuff—sardines—that’s better—in oil, six; anchovies, squiggly—”

“What?”

“Squiggly—all rolled up—two; puddings, fruit, mixed, ready cooked, tinned, twelve (I think—yes); biscuits, tinned, assorted (each tin’s a different kind, that’s what I mean by that), twelve; ham, complete, (the wrapping paper’s got a bit greasy, but that won’t matter), one (looks as if it might be fairly lean, too); bacon, rashers, long-back, one pound (I should think); soups, assorted, tinned, twelve; salad dressing, bottles, two; steak and kidney pudding, boxed, three (that ought to be rather decent); galantine, glass, three; and tinned, three (different makes, that’s why); fruit, various, tinned, twelve; jam, raspberry, two; strawberry, four; marmalade, six; custard powder, tin, one; mustard, tin, large, one; lobster, tinned, large (good!), six; meat and fish pastes, various, glass, twelve; tomato juice, tinned, six; tea, packets, quarter-pound, China, two; Indian, two; Bovril, large (sixteen ounce, in fact, so you can get a teaspoon in, which I think is a great advantage, don’t you?), one; sugar, granulated, two-pound, six; cocoa, tins, quarter-pound, three; condensed milk, sweetened, two; unsweetened, two (label it *Emergency only*); orange juice, bottled, large, two; cereal breakfast food, packets, various, six (you know, anybody would think we were spending six months on a desert island, instead of a fortnight on the Broads); vegetables, tinned, various, chiefly asparagus, celery hearts and baked beans, twelve. That seems to be the lot. I expect there’s tons we’ve forgotten. Oh, here’s a packet of pepper. I wonder whether there’s salt. Yes, here we are! Now there ought to be a couple of loaves and some butter. Got ’em. Here they are.”

“Well, that’s one job done,” said Alice, putting the top on her fountain pen. “Now where, I wonder, did we put the gramophone and those records? Oh, and did you both bring a bit of soap?”

“In the after cabin, I think. That’s where the portable wireless is. Let’s go in and see. Soap? I’ve got some. I don’t know about old Dog, but her mother packs for her, so it’s sure to be all right.”

They passed from the saloon through the tiny galley and across the launch’s cockpit to the cabin.

“Ample storage provided,” said Laura, coming down when the owner had wished her luck and had driven off in his car. She surveyed first the cabin and then the saloon and its stocks of tins and bottles. “All I ask is—where?”

“We can put quite a lot in this oven thing,” Kitty observed. “Did you bring any soap, Dog? And we can put plenty of stuff in the drawers under the spare berth. Nobody wants that for clothes.”

“What a thing it is to have a brain for organisation,” observed her friend, seating herself on the only available foot of space at the end of one of the berths, and looking on indulgently as Alice, under Kitty’s directions, proceeded to store the food.

“Get off that wretched bed, slacker, and come and help,” said Kitty, standing with three tins of pineapple in a pyramid on one hand while she used the other to help keep her balance as she picked her way over the suitcases which were still on the floor. “If you don’t want to mess about stacking the grub, undo the suitcases and bung the clothes into the drawers. Then the suitcases have to be carted ashore and stored in that little lock-up shed. Get up and get a move on, do, or we shall never cast off today.”

“Can’t duck. Can’t help.”

“Why not?”

“Because we haven’t settled yet where we’re going to sleep and it would be horribly inconvenient if I packed your things under Alice’s bunk and hers under mine and all that.”

She smiled serenely upon her baffled friend, and then got up and began to assist her. It did not take more than a few minutes to store away the tins. The bottles presented a little more difficulty, and a crate of beer, which was brought to the side of the launch by a whistling youth presented what seemed at first to be another storage problem until it occurred to the ever resourceful Kitty that there were two little seats in the observation well just aft of the foredeck and that the crate could be pushed under one of them out of the way.

“And now,” said Laura enjoyably, when everything seemed to be shipshape and they had tossed for beds, “to start her up.” She went to the cockpit and could be heard observing, “Hey, bonny boat, and ho, bonny boat, and all aboard the saucy *Hispaniola*!”

“This is the moment I’ve been dreading,” confided Kitty in low tones to Alice. “To sit in a boat controlled (or not!) by old Dog, is to take part in a

suicide pact.”

“I shouldn’t wonder,” agreed Alice, who seemed, nevertheless, unperturbed. “But the man distinctly said that if you could drive a car you’d probably be all right, and Laura did take the wheel for a bit while we had our trial run at eleven o’clock this morning, and she seemed to be able to steer, and to know how to shut off the engine.”

It was not, as a matter of fact, Laura’s first experience of the Broads, and she took the small cruiser up the river past moored craft of all kinds with a gentle skill, which restored Kitty’s confidence and justified Alice’s calm.

The holiday had been Laura’s idea. She was in the happy position of having a brother who knew a young man who knew an older man who knew still a third man who owned the small motor-cruiser *Dithyramb* and kept her at Wroxham. The result of these entangled friendships had been a considerable lessening of the usual expenses attendant upon a fortnight’s holiday on the Broads.

Laura opened the throttle, and the land began to slide by. Long hours of daylight remained, in which to cruise, laze, swim, fish and gossip. The three had lunched ashore, “to save,” as Laura expressed it, “inroading on the grub before we start,” and were looking forward to an afternoon on the water before finding moorings for the night.

They cruised upstream as far as Coltishall, a pretty place with a mill, and came back downstream to Wroxham. They passed under Wroxham Bridge with the engine barely turning over, and moved quietly past moored craft on the farther side, and then came up behind a yacht, not too well handled, which was tacking from one side of the river to the other against a slightly freshening wind. It looked in ever-increasing danger of running aground, and Laura, reducing further the very low speed at which the *Dithyramb* was proceeding, crept up until, as the yacht took the port tack, she could open out the throttle and slide past.

“They’ll be into the bank in a minute, the silly cuckoos,” she observed, reducing speed again to turn into Wroxham Broad. There were numbers of craft on Wroxham, from motor-cruisers considerably larger than their own, and some smart yachts freshly painted for the season, to punts and canoes on hire for the afternoon. There was plenty of room to cruise, however, and the girls circumnavigated the Broad before coming to moorings.

“Tea on Hoveton Little Broad,” said Laura, shutting off the engine and climbing out of the cockpit on to the roof of the saloon. She lay flat, obligingly spreading the map across her stomach so that the others could come and look at it.

Kitty folded it up and put it away, and they lay on Wroxham for an hour, Laura, who did not always sleep well at night, making up her rest whilst Kitty did some embroidery and Alice some knitting. At three they woke Laura and she took the cruiser on until a great loop of the River Bure brought them to their moorings for tea.

“Pretty!” said Alice, appreciatively, looking at the small islands of which Hoveton Little Broad was possessed. Laura, having brought the cruiser to rest, took her ease on the cabin top again and demanded that the kettle should be put on.

It was a glorious afternoon. The sun shone on the white paint, mahogany and brass of the *Dithyramb* as she lay at her pleasant moorings. The windows of the saloon twinkled with sunshine, and a streak of light made a broad bright path across the water. From other boats lying near, the sounds of voices, gramophones, and portable wireless sets came clearly and not unpleasantly on the air.

In the tiny galley Kitty grappled with a paraffin stove whilst Alice cut bread and butter. One by one the other boats slipped away, and by half-past five the cruiser lay alone, and even the wooded shores, which gave some impression of Thames-side scenery, were as deserted as the shores of an unknown island.

Laura, knowing that tea would take some time to prepare, descended to the cabin, pulled off her shirt, shorts, and sweater, kicked her feet out of her tennis shoes, put on her bathing suit and dropped overboard for a swim. She was dry and dressed again by the time the perspiring Kitty and the meek Alice came up with the tea. Alice had boiled three eggs from a private store she had brought. The eggs were partly swathed in handkerchiefs, as the cruiser boasted no egg-cups, Laura grasping hers with a strongly scented paraffin rag.

“It was a handkerchief,” she objected, when Kitty, with a motherly cry of horror, commanded her to give it up, and herself dropped it into the cockpit. “Where are we going to moor for the night, by the way?”

This proved to be a debatable point and they argued it, Kitty from the galley where she went to do the washing up, Alice from the saloon, where

she was busy putting blankets on the berths (for these were used as seats during the day-time), Laura from the cabin, where she had the map spread on her knees.

At last, as there was no majority verdict, it was decided to cruise on and stay the night as the first likely-looking spot. The cruiser carried no lights (one of the points of agreement with the owner had been that there should be no cruising after dark), so moorings had to be found in the early evening.

“Of course, come to that, I suppose we could have stayed on the Broad with the islands, where we had tea,” observed Alice, as the *Dithyramb* slid by an inn near the village of Lower Street and the river bent sharply southwards to Horning Ferry. A quarter of a mile from the ferry a windmill stood up like a landmark, and a short distance from the windmill an inviting staithe caused Laura to draw in to the side and shut off the engine.

“What about running up the staithe a bit to see what it looks like?” she suggested. The idea was well received, so she took the narrow channel carefully, and bade the others get forward and keep a look-out for weed which would foul the propeller. Fortunately the staithe had been cleaned and the passage was comparatively clear. To the delight of the girls, the staithe opened into a tiny Broad, unnamed (although marked) on the map. It was less than a hundred yards across at its widest point, and was shaped like a four-pointed star. What was even more intriguing was the fact that it proved to have two entrances onto the staithe, for they cruised all round it before deciding upon their night moorings. It was heavily wooded at the western end, and had marshy ground to the south.

“Mosquitoes,” said Kitty, pointing to the map, speaking in the voice of doom, and then surveying the marshes. “For goodness’ sake let’s moor somewhere else for the night. I don’t want to get malaria.”

This remark was received with groans of derision from Laura, and the comfortable opinion from Alice that there was not the slightest need to moor anywhere near the marshes. Thus overruled, Kitty fell silent, merely remarking later, when all three of them heartily wished that her advice had been followed, that she had never liked the spot from the beginning.

“But you did!” protested Laura, every time the argument began. “You agreed to moor there, in the end, just as much as we did. You and your old mosquitoes!”

At any rate, no thought of future horrors troubled the three as, before mooring for the night, they cruised back to the staithe and explored it to its end. This came abruptly in a board across the water, which said: *Private Grounds*. It was impossible to turn round in such a narrow waterway, so Laura had to take the cruiser out in reverse, an irritating operation but one which, fortunately, did not last very long. Once back on the Broad, and at moorings, the girls prepared the evening meal by broaching stores and making a jug of cocoa to drink with the tinned food. By half-past nine they were glad to put on wraps, for, with the decline of the sun, the air was chilly and a white mist was creeping across the waters from the marshes.

“*La Belle Dame Sans Merci*,” said Laura, suddenly, with a shiver. “Come on. Who says bed?”

The mattresses on the berths were well-sprung and comfortable. It had been agreed that Alice and Kitty should share the cabin and that Laura should take one of the two berths in the saloon. There was some desultory conversation after all had gone to bed, but it died away as first Kitty and then Alice fell asleep.

Laura remained awake. She required little sleep, and often lay awake until one or two o’clock, resting, comfortable, and perfectly content, turning over in her mind the events of the day or planning the pleasures of the morrow.

The night on the Broad was full of sounds, and she amused herself for some time by trying to interpret them. Some were easy enough—the plop and splash of leaping fish, the cry of a night-bird; but at about eleven o’clock came others to which she could assign no meaning. She lay in the dark, ears strained to listen, mind working but incapable of producing any likely explanation. The sounds grew a little more decided. She sat up and looked out, but it was too dark to see much.

If the cruiser had been moored by the bank she might have thought of water-voles rustling their way from water to sheltered hole; but the cruiser was too far out on the Broad for even the sharpest ears to catch such a very slight sound. Besides, these mysterious stirrings were louder and came more regularly than would have been the case had the movements of voles been accountable for them.

The sounds died away, and, listen as she might, she heard no more of them. She lay awake for some time, trying to interpret them, but could not.

Her thoughts merged at last into dreams, and she slept until five in the morning.

She got up quietly when she woke, for the daylight was already sufficiently advanced to allow her to find her way about the small saloon. She slipped off her pyjamas, put on her bathing costume, and went out to test the temperature. It was cold on deck. She lay flat on her stomach and reached down over the stern of the cruiser to dabble her fingers in the water. That was cold, too.

She went back for a towel, stepped carefully into the dinghy and, with the towel round her shoulders for warmth, rowed to the shore by the woods. Here she thought she had an explanation of the mysterious sounds of the night, for, drawn up in a kind of little creek, which ran muddily into the wood and formed the estuary of a tiny woodland stream, was a sailing-dinghy. Its mast was down, however, and its sail presumably in the sail locker. Short oars lay in the bottom of the boat, and, to her great surprise, both the blades of the oars and the rowlocks of the dinghy were muffled with pieces of dark blue velvet. Moreover, the name of the dinghy had been painted out, a touch in itself intriguing.

A desire to elucidate this mystery almost overcame commonsense, but Laura realised that a bathing costume was not the garment in which to explore woods in the early morning. Shivering with cold, she rowed round to the opposite side of the Broad, where the cruiser's hull would screen her from view (although why she wished to be hidden from the unknown adventurer she could not have told). Here, with thin mud squelching between her toes, she waded into the water, swam vigorously until she was warm, lay on her back and floated, then took a long, lazy swim until she was tired.

The marshes were to her left when at last she climbed out upon the bank, which here was a strip of grass near the water's edge. She dried her arms and legs, wiped moisture from her hair (which no swimming cap ever kept dry), dried her face, soaked off the drips from her costume, and then rowed back to the cruiser. She came a little out of her course, however, to look again for the dinghy. It was still there.

Kitty was frying bacon. The pleasant smell came in to the saloon from the galley as Laura dressed. Alice, at the table in the saloon, was cutting bread and setting out plates and cups.

"What's it like in?" she asked.

“Cold,” said Laura, “but not bad. I say, did you hear somebody rowing past us at about eleven last night?”

“No. I expect I was asleep.”

“Well, it’s rather weird.” She explained, pulling on, as she did so, slacks and a sweater over her vest and knickers.

“Muffled oars?” repeated Alice, her thoughts going back to adventure stories she had read in her youth. “Smugglers, do you think?”

“Hardly. Nothing here to smuggle. At least, I shouldn’t think so, although I suppose you can smuggle almost anywhere, come to that.”

“What about poachers?”

“Much more likely. But poachers would be gone again by now, I should have thought. Besides, would they muffle their oars in velvet?”

It was agreed that it was an interesting point, and that they must put it to Kitty. That heroine appearing pan in hand at the moment, she was regaled with the story whilst she pushed rashers off on to plates. She approved of the narration to the extent of proposing that all three should take the dinghy ashore after breakfast and follow the poachers through the woods.

“Ass!” said Laura. “If the woods are preserved we shall get into just as much trouble as the poachers—or nearly as much.”

“But you said just now you were going to follow the trail yourself, only you’d got your bathing things on and no shoes, and it was so cold,” Kitty pointed out.

“Yes, I know. But I wasn’t thinking of poachers then. That idea came later.”

“And from me,” said Alice, who, although mild and self-effacing, did not intend to be left completely out of the picture.

“You know what I think, Dog?” said Alice.

“No. What?”

“I think it’s just somebody on holiday having a rag. Take it or leave it, but it’s much the most likely idea.”

“I don’t know,” said Alice. “Which side is the staithe from here?”

“That way,” said Laura, jerking her head towards the port window of the saloon. “We’ve swung a bit. You’re thinking of that notice. So am I. But, so far as I could see, the woods where that dinghy is lying are open to anybody. There was no notice boards or anything. Not even a fence.”

“Then, after breakfast, I still vote we go and see the muffled oars,” said Kitty. “It will be something to do. It gets a bit same-like on this boat.”

“Well, we could land and have a look round,” agreed Laura, “but I’m not going to get jugged for upsetting somebody’s private shooting. Another thing: before we do anything else this morning I’m going to test the depth where we are for diving.”

She took a homemade lead line out of the drawer beneath her berth, and went on deck to test the depth of the water.

“All right, if you dive fairly shallow,” she said to Alice. “The water’s deep enough, but there’s a good bit of weed just here. I’m not going in again until just before lunch. Do you want to go in earlier? By the way, that dinghy isn’t there now.”

“That’s good. I didn’t want to seem snoopy. All right, let’s wash up and go ashore.”

So at just after eight o’clock, when the mist was clearing and the sun had begun to shine brightly, the three stepped ashore from the cruiser. Laura had been able to bring it to a mooring by the wood, not far from where she had seen the dinghy with muffled oars. True enough, there seemed to be no notice boards warning trespassers, and the three girls began to walk in single file along the edge of the little stream.

There was no path, but the margin of the stream in itself seemed to offer a track. Laura, in the lead, kept her eyes on the ground for footprints, but there were none. Kitty, in the rear, kept glancing behind her for keepers, but there were none of those, either. Alice, in the middle, told both of them not to be silly. To Laura she said that a person who had taken the trouble to muffle his oars and rowlocks so that he could not be heard would be hardly likely to leave a trail which could easily be followed; to Kitty she pointed out that there would not be keepers if there were no notice boards.

To all this logic her friends made no pertinent reply. The little stream wound on until it reached open country. The first indication that it had brought them round to the marshes was given, although involuntarily, by Laura, who suddenly put her foot into a thick morass and withdrew it with a hasty exclamation and an unpleasant squelching sound.

“Mosquitoes!” cried Kitty, turning and taking to flight. The others also turned in their tracks, but followed more leisurely.

“What do we do now?” Alice enquired, when they came to the edge of the wood.

“Search for tracks,” replied the leader of the party. “We’ve nothing to do until you two can bathe, and that can’t be for at least another half-hour,

considering the breakfast you ate. We might as well loaf about here as loaf on board, particularly as old K. seems bored with the cruiser already. And, by the way, weren't you a Girl Guide, or something, in your youth?"

"Yes, I was. I still am, come to that."

"Well, can't you cast about and find a few footprints or something?"

"Yes, I daresay I could, but is there any point? After all, it's no business of ours what people do."

"True for you. All right, then. Let's get back on board and go for a cruise instead. After all, you can bathe somewhere else. Come on, K.," she called to the third member of the party, who was gazing at the leafy trees and seemed to be lost in meditation. "All aboard. We're off."

"Oh, why, Dog?" queried Kitty, turning round. "Why don't we go for a nice little walk through the woods? You've got a pocket compass, haven't you? We can steer by that, and avoid those beastly marshes. I want to stretch my legs."

"You can do that in the water when you swim."

"I thought we were going to swim here. It's quiet and nice and private. My swimming's not so hot that I want to show it off in front of a lot of people. Let's have a walk and then a swim, and then move off and find somewhere nice for lunch."

"Well, in that case, we may as well see what the bloke was up to last night with his muffled oars."

There were several paths through the woods. The first led straight to the stream, and so they retraced their steps. The second petered out among thick undergrowth. The third led straight to a deep ditch choked with dead leaves into which they sank nearly to their knees.

Laura came out from the leaf-mould, retired some twenty yards and essayed a running jump, but the ground on the opposite side of the ditch was boggy and in she went, ruining her slacks, and experiencing some difficulty in getting back to the others, who were considerably amused by her plight and at her appearance.

"You'll have to come back and change, and spread out those trousers to dry. When the mud is hard we'll be able to brush it off," said Kitty consolingly. So, escorting Laura, who was rather disconsolate and very damp and uncomfortable, they filed back through the trees and regained the cruiser.

It was when she was dry, clean, and changed that Laura suddenly said,

“Well, there *must* be a way through those woods, or where did that blighter get to? I’m going to get to know if I *choke* in mud. Go on, young Alice. Do your stuff. Nose about and pick up his footprints or something. Come on, K. Let’s sit on the cabin-top while our Alice looks around a bit and strikes the trail.”

Leaving Alice to pore over the damp verge for footprints, the other two sat on the cabin-roof with their feet on the narrow deck, and watched the sleuth at work. They were there for about six minutes before she waved her hand.

“Come on,” said Kitty. They had moored the cruiser at a spot where the bank came almost level with the deck, so that it was easy to step ashore. Alice was at the spot where Laura had seen the dinghy, and when they came up with her she pointed to some almost indecipherable marks on the edge of the mud.

“Here’s where he put his feet going away from the boat,” she said. “You can see where an otter crossed his tracks. That must have been *after* dark. Now, taking a compass bearing”—she took off her wrist watch and twisted the hands round, facing the hour hand towards the sun—“he made off almost due east. Come on. Follow me and look out for further tracks.”

“Golly!” said Laura, who did not believe a word of this exposition but who was impressed by what she termed a “lavish display of eyewash by our Alice.” “We strike the trail.”

Whether by Alice’s luck or judgement—to the last they were not sure which it was—they did strike the trail, finding guidemarks now on a patch of scraped moss near the foot of a tree, now what Laura called “a genuine Man Friday” on a patch of mud, and in time—twelve minutes, to be exact (which Kitty had been, for she had glanced at her watch the moment they had begun walking into the woods behind Alice)—they came upon a clearing. In the clearing was a very small bungalow.

“Vulgar intrigue,” said Kitty, voicing the first thought in the minds of all three of them. “So now we know.”

“I thought it would be something unedifying,” said Laura ungratefully to Alice.

It was Alice who suggested that, if that were all, it was surely carrying secrecy to excess to have muffled the oars.

“You couldn’t possibly hear anybody rowing across the Broad at this distance,” she pointed out.

“Didn’t want *us* to hear him,” said Kitty, without much logic, as Laura immediately indicated.

“Doesn’t matter to *us* what time of night he chooses to do his visiting,” she observed. “It isn’t any business of ours, and nobody else was about.”

“We’re saying ‘him’ and ‘his,’ you know,” said Alice. “There’s been nothing yet to prove it wasn’t a woman.”

“Women don’t muffle their oars and row across at night.”

“I don’t see that you can say that. Besides, the velvet suggests a woman. So does the sleeriness, somehow.”

“Blackleg!” said Laura, striking an indignant, feminist note.

“I’m not a blackleg! I respect my own sex as much as you do, but some women are frightfully hole-and-corner, much more so than most men!”

“I don’t believe it. What about men who come home late at night and take their boots off at the bottom of the stairs, and keep their dressing gown hidden under the coats in the hall, and pretend they only went downstairs to let the cat out, or because they heard burglars, or something?”

Alice, intimidated by this formidable monologue, changed the subject and suggested that as they had put themselves to so much trouble to find out nothing, they could at least knock at the door and ask for a drink of water.

“I’m terribly thirsty,” she said. As the others were also thirsty, this excellent and practical scheme was at once adopted, Laura doing the knocking, the others close at her shoulder. There was no reply, however, so, after the third attempt, they gave up, and walked round to the side of the bungalow. Here a small fence divided, as Laura put it, “the desert from the sown.” It continued round the back of the building, about twelve feet from the walls, but stopped as abruptly as it had begun, bounding the bungalow on two sides only, the others being both left open to the wood. The fence, however, was so dilapidated that it could be assumed it had once completely enclosed the bungalow, but that the two sides, having fallen into ruin, had been removed, probably for firewood, and the owner had not troubled to replace them.

“Let’s try the back door,” said Laura. She rapped on it with her knuckles, but, to her surprise, it suddenly burst open, and she almost fell into the kitchen.

“Faulty latch,” said she, critically. “Anyhow, it’s obviously an empty house, so it doesn’t much matter.”

She was about to put one foot inside to get hold of the handle and pull the door to, when she saw the body on the floor. She turned, white-faced, to the others. “It’s—there’s somebody in there,” she said. Kitty, coming to her shoulder, peered over into the kitchen.

The body was that of an untidy-looking woman of early middle age. Her sunken cheeks were heavily raddled with rouge, and her mouth was a sickening splash of lipstick.

“Unsavoury sort of blighter, whoever she is,” said Laura, going in first, but closely followed by Kitty who immediately knelt beside the woman. “Get up, K. You can’t do anything for her. She’s dead, I’m afraid.”

The woman lay on her back in a stiff, unnatural position, and it was quite evident that Laura was right. However, Alice had brought a handbag. It contained a small mirror. Laura took the mirror, held it above the slightly-open mouth, and then put her hand to the inner side of the woman’s left breast to feel her heart. The others watched her. She got up, shrugging her shoulders, but with every scrap of colour drained from her face.

“How to get hold of anyone?” she said. Kitty, who knew her very well, put a hand on her shoulder and said “Buck up, Dog,” in comforting tones. Laura was going to reply, when Alice spoke up.

“Back to the boat,” said Alice, making a move. “If she’s dead, the police ought to know. We must get to a telephone somewhere.”

They pulled the door to behind them, and then hurried back through the trees.

The cruiser was no longer moored where they had left it. It was well out in the middle of the Broad, the dinghy still trailing behind it.

“Here, I don’t like this!” said Laura, who had recovered her colour. “Somebody’s started her up. She couldn’t have drifted. Can’t think why we didn’t hear the engine.”

“I think I did,” confessed Kitty, “but I didn’t bother to mention it. I heard an engine going almost as soon as we came in sight of the bungalow, but I just thought it was somebody else on the Broad. I mean, you wouldn’t think of anybody moving anybody else’s boat.”

“Somebody must have been hidden on board the first time we came back—you know—from the marshes,” said Alice. “Well, what do we do? I don’t like it. What do you have to say about it, Dog?”

“Got a penknife in that handbag of yours?” demanded Laura, who spoke as though this were a reasonable answer to the question.

“Yes, of course.”

“Any other lethal weapons?”

“No, of course not. What do you mean?”

“All right. Nothing. Let’s cast about and find a few heavy stones. You’re a dead shot with a cricket ball. Think you could lay anybody out with a half-brick, if the need arose?”

“Oh, but...”

“Don’t care about people who muffle their oars and leave dead women about, duck. And there’s no doubt we’ve been watched, I should rather think.”

“But she may have died....”

“After he, she, or it, left? Well, I don’t fancy she did, and I have my reasons. Besides, what price Mrs. Crocodile Bradley and that murder at College? I may have murder on the brain as a consequence, but it’s better to be careful than croaked. Got plenty of stones, K.?” she demanded, as the third member of the party stooped about “to gather in the sheaves” as Laura put it.

“They aren’t very easy to find. I’ve got about eight or nine. Nine,” she added, making a neat little mound.

“Mount guard over ’em, young Alice, retaining one in the palm of the hand,” commanded Laura. “Don’t you do any throwing, K. You couldn’t hit the Woolworth Building. Feed ’em to Alice if there’s trouble. I’m going to swim out to the poor old stranded wreck and bring her alongside. Give me the penknife, in case the bloke’s still on board.”

Alice handed it over, hypnotized as usual, by the spectacle of Laura in action, for, whilst she spoke, Laura took off shoes, socks, slacks, and jersey, and, lightly but sufficiently clad in her vest and knickers, put the penknife, open, between her teeth and waded into the water at a point the bank sloped down into oozy mud.

“The woman who braved all,” she remarked as articulately as she could. She waded in up to her waist; then she sank gently forward on the water and began to swim towards the cruiser. Alice watched the woods and Kitty the swimmer. A cry of satisfaction from Kitty then informed Alice that Laura had gained the cruiser, and had waved a hand to indicate all was well.

• CHAPTER 5 •

“For the Duchess. An invitation from the Queen to play croquet.”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“That’s the tale as the young ladies told it, ma’am,” the police inspector concluded, “and, as I say, it checks up. There was nobody on board when Miss Menzies got to the cruiser, and as soon as she had picked up the other ladies they telephoned from Wroxham for us and a doctor. The woman was dead all right. Murdered in the bedroom, most likely, and then dragged into the kitchen. Stabbed clean through the heart, and when we got her to the mortuary, *this* was found.” He opened a drawer in the desk, and took out a curious object. It was a toy snake made or worsted in the way that children make woollen reins on a cotton reel with four tin-tacks, so that its body was solid and circular. Some beads had been sewn on here and there, and its head, which was made of two pieces of soft leather stuck together with thin glue, was horribly and cleverly an imitation of the flat broad head of the English viper, which is without the head-shield common to most specimens of poisonous snakes.

“You can handle it as freely as you wish, ma’am. It’s been gone all over for fingerprints, but there’s nothing to be got from such a surface. If it was beaded all over we might have got something, although I doubt whether, even then, it would have been a clear enough print for identification purposes. But it’s mostly worsted, as you can see. It was pushed partly into the wound. You can see the blood on the leather. Somebody very nastily barmy did that, ma’am. Sort of murder that leads to others, I shouldn’t wonder.”

“I know the three students well, of course,” Mrs. Bradley remarked. She drew out a small magnifying glass and examined the worsted viper with very great interest.

“We questioned them separately after we’d had their story,” the inspector observed, “but there wasn’t any more to be got. Of course, only Miss Menzies can swear to the boat being there. The dinghy with the muffled oars and rowlocks, I mean. The other two didn’t see it. And only Miss Menzies can swear to hearing what she takes to have been the sound of muffled oars going past the cruiser in the night. Still, what she says about the time fits in pretty well with what the doctor says. Thinks the woman was killed after midnight, and not later than three in the morning. What I can’t make out, though, is why on earth the man didn’t make his getaway at once. Why leave it until the young ladies were up and about? It was touch and go they didn’t see him slip past while they were having their breakfast. He must have known the night before that their cruiser was anchored on the Broad—or why should he muffle his oars? As one of the ladies pointed out, you couldn’t hear the sound of ordinary rowing from that bungalow. Even when he started up the engine of their own cruiser, they didn’t really notice. Those trees are thick just there, and it’s wonderful how a wood will muffle sounds.”

“I’d like to see the bungalow,” said Mrs. Bradley, rising. “And I’d like to get the students to take me, if you don’t mind. I suppose there’s no reason why they shouldn’t go there again?”

“Not the slightest, if they’ve no objection themselves. It seems Miss Menzies realised it might be murder. I couldn’t get her to tell me why—just said she probably had it on the brain—but she doesn’t strike me as that kind of fanciful young lady.”

“I expect she felt the worsted viper in the wound. You remember that she was the one who felt for the woman’s heartbeats. She probably thought it was the weapon still in the body.”

“Ah, most likely, ma’am. I didn’t think of that. The other two said she went pretty white about the gills. I’ll ring up, ma’am, and see whether I can locate them. According to the schedule they worked out for us, they should be somewhere in the South Walsham district by now. And that’s another thing. If our gentleman with the dinghy is still on the Broads he’ll take some tracking down, especially as we’ve nothing at all to go on—no description or such, and not even the name of the dinghy. Of course, if we could assume that it’s Mr. Bleriot himself, well, we know him all right, but, as you say, no use to jump to conclusions, and it may not be him, or anything to do with him, at all.”

“How did he come to disappear?” Mrs. Bradley enquired, sitting down again and taking out her notebook.

“Ah, thereby hangs a tale,” replied the inspector. “That is, according to the super here. He points out they had nothing on him, so couldn’t ask him to report to them, or anything of that kind, but fortunately he puts up at that very hotel in Tombland where you’re staying yourself. The manager is a friend of the superintendent, so he was able to take him aside and put it to him that the police could do with an occasional report on the gentleman’s movements, and were to be notified immediately if he looked like moving from the hotel. Well, it was a case of a midnight flit—*only*, our gentleman leaves money on the dressing table well over and above the amount of his bill, with a very civil note, saying he’s been called away by his Muse to write poetry in the North, and hopes they won’t mind him going off so suddenly. He must have shinned down a water-pipe or something, for the last that anyone saw was him going up to bed as usual, round about eleven o’clock, and nobody to be seen when the chambermaid took his tea in in the morning.”

“Luggage?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“He only had a couple of suitcases. Both were still there, but there wasn’t much in them. He must have made a brown-paper parcel and dropped it out of the window before he began his climb down.”

“I wonder whether I might be permitted to see the body?” Mrs. Bradley suggested. “It is just possible that I might be able to determine whether Amos Bleriot was the type to commit such a murder. A stab through the heart, I think you said?”

“Very clean, ma’am, and only one blow.”

“Hm! Not so easy to accomplish as some people might think. I should be very glad of an opportunity to see it for myself.”

“I think that could be managed, ma’am, you having met the superintendent, and also having Inspector Pirberry’s OK. I suppose it would be too much to expect that you could give us a line on the corpse?—For purposes of identification, I mean.”

“It is unlikely, Inspector; but if anything strikes me about her you shall know it.”

“You can’t say fairer than that, ma’am. We’re keeping her as long as we can, in case any evidence of identification should turn up, but we can’t keep her out after Saturday. Even that’s stretching it a bit.”

Mrs. Bradley did not ask for an elucidation of this statement, but went with her guide to the mortuary.

“Here’s what she was wearing, ma’am.”

Mrs. Bradley looked at the cheap and tawdry clothing, the worthless jewellery, the almost complete absence of underclothing, the high-heeled shoes and cobweb stockings, and then turned to look at the body from which these poor lendings had come.

“Advanced stage of pulmonary tuberculosis,” she said. “Not much doubt how she made her living, either, Inspector. There are various indications....”

“So we’ve been told, ma’am. But whatever may be the truth about that, she was murdered, without a doubt, and by somebody who knew something about where to stick a knife.”

“A knife. Yes. A sailor’s knife, now....”

“That might give us a line, ma’am. She must have been decoyed to that bungalow, for there’s not a stick of furniture in it. We’ve been on to the agents. It hasn’t been let these twelve years. Got a bad reputation.”

“It will have a worse one now,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I should get on to Scotland Yard, Inspector. You will have noticed the London tab-marks on frock and coat, and the London bus ticket in the handbag. There’s so much water round here that a victim could be conveyed all the way from Great Yarmouth by river, and there’s nothing to say that she couldn’t be brought from London to Yarmouth in a boat.”

“Nothing at all, ma’am. I’ll get the Chief Constable in on that idea. Meanwhile, you’d like to see the young ladies. They might have information that they’d part with to you, you knowing them in a kind of school-marm way. If they *should* spill anything, ma’am....”

Mrs. Bradley nodded, but she was puzzled. From the nature of the wound, which had three rather curious little puncture marks around it, as though there had been some doubt in the mind of the person holding the knife as to which was the exact spot at which to strike, she would have said that there was at least as much evidence for suicide as for murder. But the substitution of the snake, and the disappearance of the weapon must be held to be conclusive, she supposed.

• CHAPTER 6 •

“Let’s go on with the game,” the Queen said to Alice; and Alice was too much frightened to say a word, but slowly followed her back to the croquet ground.

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

South Walsham Broad is in two parts joined by a short stream. Mrs. Bradley, having driven from Norwich in her own car, had come by a secondary road through the little village of Rockheath Corner and round by the hamlet of Panxworth into South Walsham. Here she was informed, after enquiry at the post-office, that at the south-western approach to the village was a side road which crossed a stream which ran into a sizeable pond. On the opposite side of the pond, a little farther on, there was a school, and just before she reached the school she would find a lane which would take her on to the verge of South Walsham larger Broad. As this Broad was private, however, except for sailing and cruising, and they were looking for friends, it might be better to continue on their way through the village, turn left and then left again at Pilson Green, and come to the margin of the smaller Broad.

The united intelligence of George the chauffeur and of Mrs. Bradley herself contrived to make sufficient of all this to bring them within sight of the smaller Broad. Bidding George find a suitable place to park the car, Mrs. Bradley set off on foot in search of the students and their cruiser.

Knowing Laura Menzies sufficiently well to realise that if she had told the police (or anyone else) that she would be on South Walsham Broad that day, that was where she would be found, Mrs. Bradley unslung the field-glasses she had brought with her, and inspected the stretch of water.

It was not difficult to find the *Dithyramb*. She was moored close to the bank not more than fifty yards from where Mrs. Bradley had got out of the car.

Laura was alone. She was seated on deck with a book, her long legs sprawling, her feet on the cruiser's gunwale, a bag of sweets by her side. Mrs. Bradley hailed her. The reader straightened her back and almost sent the book and the sweets flying onto the bank.

"I'm so glad to see you," she said, when she had helped Mrs. Bradley (redundant courtesy!) aboard the cruiser, and had invited her to sit down on the cabin roof. "We *have* had a time! What with the body and the police and having to give a timetable of our movements so that we simply can't stir a step without feeling like ticket-of-leave men! It's absolutely ruined the holiday. I didn't want young Alice to write. It didn't seem fair. But I'm jolly glad she did now. It's awfully decent of you. I suppose you want to know all about it."

"Where are the others?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"Gone to have a look at Saint Benet's Abbey. They're going to stay to tea. I'm not expecting them back very much before eight, I'm afraid. Still, I could tell you anything you wanted to know."

"What I want, as well as to hear what you can tell me, is a sight of the bungalow. I have the permission of the police. I suppose it is still being guarded?"

"I wouldn't know. All I know is that the inspector quite decently agreed that any two of us could go off at a time, so long as he knew how to get in touch with one of us. Still, it's messed things up a bit. It means that the three of us can't go off together, and there are heaps of things to see and places to visit."

"Have patience. We may be able to lift the embargo soon. At any rate, I'll do my best for you. Now I have permission from the inspector for you to leave this Broad, if you yourself have no objection, in order that you may take me on a personally-conducted tour. *Have* you any objection?"

"Not in the least. It won't take us long to get there in the cruiser. Weren't we lucky to get her? We're only paying a pound a week each for the hire. That's not much more than a quarter of what she'd cost at this time of year if we'd hired in the ordinary way."

Taken over the cruiser, Mrs. Bradley expressed admiration of everything she was shown, accepted a cup of tea, and then Laura started the engine.

"We've got plenty of petrol," she said.

She took the cruiser along Fleet Dyke and up the western arm of the U-shaped bend in the River Bure, which encloses Ward Marsh. Then they ran past the conjunction of the Ant and the Bure, followed the bends and windings of the latter river, and came soon to the staithe up which lay the tiny Broad they sought.

“This is the first opening,” said Laura. “We came up it for peace and quiet. We’re thinking of lying hove-to in the middle of Wroxham or Ranworth Broad next time we come this way!”

She took the cruise, with a turn at right angles, into a smaller staithe, and then branched off to the left. The tiny Broad swelled out. Mrs. Bradley first noticed the woods, and Laura made straight towards them. She leapt ashore, held out a hand to Mrs. Bradley, and together they set out through the trees.

A policeman was on duty at the bungalow. He read, very slowly and carefully, Mrs. Bradley’s official permit, then saluted and let them go in. There followed an almost silent twenty minutes, whilst Mrs. Bradley, having been shown by Laura the kitchen and the exact position in which the body had been found, turned to and explored with zeal the rest of the building.

“Do they know who she was?” asked Laura when Mrs. Bradley, straightening her back, announced that there was nothing else to be done.

“No, child; at least, not yet. The general inference is that she had been decoyed here. The police found no clothes nor baggage which would suggest that she lived in the place, and, as we have seen, the rooms are not carpeted or furnished, and one of the bedroom floors is ruinous. In fact, the whole building is rapidly falling to pieces.”

“Yes; horrible place,” said Laura. “I suppose this is the sitting-room?” She gave it another glance. The one armchair had no seat worth calling such, and was worm-eaten, rotted, and showed rusty springs through all that remained of its upholstery. The window was thick with cobwebs. The floor, however, had not only been swept but scrubbed, and was in better condition than any other floor in the place with the possible exception of the kitchen.

Even in this room, however, there were rat-holes in the wainscoting and the planking, and Mrs. Bradley, poking inquisitively up the chimney with a stick she had brought in from outside, brought down a bird’s nest, dusty and obviously some seasons old, yet showing no traces of soot.

“Nobody here in the winter for years,” said Laura. “I—I felt the weapon in the wound, you know,” she added, “when I tried to find out whether she was dead. Couldn’t it have been suicide, on that?”

“Yes, if you had really felt a weapon; but the police don’t think you did.” She described the viper made of worsted, which had been thrust down into the wound. Laura grimaced.

“How beastly!”

“Yes, it was. None of you picked up anything which could possibly have been a weapon, of course?”

“We’ve been asked by the police about that. There was nothing at all. Of course, we didn’t go anywhere in the place except just inside the kitchen door, and she wasn’t killed in the kitchen. I mean, all that scrubbing. That was to take out the bloodstains. Must have been, don’t you think?”

Mrs. Bradley did not commit herself on this point. Certainly there were reddish stains on the floor, but she did not think they were blood. However, it would be for the police experts, as she pointed out to Laura, to decide just what had been scrubbed off the only sound floor in the house.

“If it was murder, you’d almost think the weapon would have been left in the wound to make it look like suicide, wouldn’t you?” Laura continued. “Oh, no, of course not, unless you could get the murdered person’s prints on the hilt and not your own. And then they’d have to be in exactly the right place, wouldn’t they?”

Mrs. Bradley agreed, and suggested that, as there seemed nothing more to be done in the bungalow at the time, they should return to the shore of the Broad. As soon as they had left the screen of trees, Laura observed that this time the cruiser had not been moved.

“We felt a bit funny, I can tell you,” she said, “when we got back here last time and saw the *Dithyramb* stuck out there in the middle.”

“I have no doubt about it,” Mrs. Bradley responded. “It must have been a shock, after finding the body.”

“You’ve said it,” Laura agreed.

“It was certainly rather rash of you to swim out to it. I suppose you saw nothing else to do.”

“I still don’t see anything else I could have done.”

“It was certainly very brave.”

“Well, I don’t know about that. I jolly well hoped that if there was a man—the murderer, you know—on board, he hadn’t got a gun. That was

my chief thought all the time I was swimming out.”

“Exactly where was this dinghy, the first time you saw it?”

Laura went to the spot.

“It was here. You can still just see where he drew it up in this soft patch near the clump of meadowsweet.” They both stood and looked at the scraped black earth. “He couldn’t have picked it up and carried it inland,” added Laura, “if that’s what you were thinking, but, of course, he could have shoved off again and crawled round the Broad and got out by the other channel. Come aboard again. I’ll show you.”

They returned to the cruiser and left the Broad by means of the second entrance. Mrs. Bradley shook her head, but not, Laura thought, watching the sharp black eyes, in disagreement with the theory that the unknown man had used this way to get out of sight of the *Dithyramb*.

“We have to remember,” said Mrs. Bradley, “that the dinghy was removed out of sight of the cruiser before you three girls went ashore. Then, after you had disappeared among the trees, the man (or men) came back to the cruiser, which was moored near the bank, I think you said, and took her out into the middle of the Broad. That seems such a curious little incident that I should very much like to find the explanation for it. Can *you* make any suggestion?”

“No. I’ve thought about it a good deal. We all have. As a matter of fact, we wondered whether Kitty and I were alone on board whilst Alice was snooping about for footprints and things before we found the way to the bungalow. What do you think?”

“I don’t know what to think about that, child. Did the police search the cruiser?”

“Had a look over her, that’s all, and shook out the cushions and looked among the stores. I asked the inspector what they were looking for, and he laughed and said that would be telling. My personal private view, which, out of respect for the law, I took care not to disclose, was that they didn’t know themselves what they were looking for. Oh, and we’ve all had our fingerprints taken. He asked whether we objected, but, of course, we were thrilled to bits, except young Alice. She thought it was rather low.”

Mrs. Bradley chuckled.

“How often do you examine your propeller?” she asked.

“Haven’t bothered. Shan’t, unless we get a lot of weed. Even then, going astern will usually take it off. I know there’s weed here, but it’s only a

nuisance if you dive too deep. It's too far down below the surface to affect the boat. She only draws about a couple of feet. Why?"

"Just an idea," said Mrs. Bradley. "Would you mind taking the cruiser out to the spot where you found her when you climbed on board, knife between teeth?"

Laura took the cruiser slowly out on to the Broad. She stopped the engine, fiddled with the wheel whilst the cruiser, still underway, was drifting, and then said:

"Just about here, as near as I can get it."

"Ah," said Mrs. Bradley. "Now, would you mind testing the depth of the water?"

Laura went below for her homemade lead line, dropped it over and drew it up.

"Six feet," she said. "All right?"

"It is all right for me if it is all right for you," said Mrs. Bradley. "One moment."

She produced a small revolver.

"Just to avoid what some have called rannygazoo," she observed, examining it with care. "Now, whilst I sit on deck and keep an eye on the neighbourhood, my dear Laura, I shall be very much obliged if you will enter the water and take a look at the propeller."

"O.K.," observed Laura, beginning to pull off her sweater. She was not long in the water.

"Fastened to the shaft of the propeller? And a sheath-knife, ma'am?" said the inspector, when Mrs. Bradley had returned on board the *Dithyramb* to South Walsham, and then had got in touch with him again. "Many thanks, ma'am. I only hope that will be Exhibit A at the trial, if we can land our fish. He's going to be a big one, by the sound of it. I've had some people here since you left this afternoon...yes, another murder. On board a houseboat, this time, and a very funny story attached....Our Mr. Bleriot is doing himself proud, if it *is* him. Another woman, too, and much the same type as the first one. Homicidal maniac, all right. Wonder what effect it will have on the holiday-makers? Scare 'em off, I should think."

• CHAPTER 7 •

This did not seem to encourage the witness at all; he kept shifting from one foot to the other, looking uneasily at the Queen, and in his confusion he bit a large piece out of his tea-cup instead of the bread and butter.

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The Whitstables and the Ferriers always took their summer holidays together. Mrs. Whitstable and Mrs. Ferrier were sisters, their husbands were friends, and Joan Whitstable and Gavin Ferrier, the children, were much of an age. Apart from these pleasant and convenient facts, there was another which, if less pleasant (looked at from one point of view) was no less convenient. It was that holidays, of the kind which these families preferred, came a good deal cheaper for six than they would have done for three plus three.

George Whitstable was a painter; William Ferrier was, vaguely, in the City. The two children were the determining factor when holiday dates were arranged, for both were still at school. Before the end of May, William Ferrier had always “fixed up” at the office to take a fortnight at the end of July, during August, or at the beginning of September. This year he had been allotted the fortnight beginning on Saturday, July 25th, and ending on the following Sunday three weeks, thus including an extra weekend upon which (for he was a simple-minded man whom a very little served to please) to congratulate himself.

Asked by his fellow workers what he proposed to do for his holiday, he replied that he had “taken a house, as usual, only this time it was a houseboat.”

This startling departure from custom had been received with loud applause by the children, and had been the subject of anxious debate by the wives. Mrs. Ferrier, in fact, had gone so far as to consult her doctor, to discover whether, in his opinion, houseboats were healthy. Mrs. Whitstable,

larger, lazier, and more philosophic in some ways than her sister, did not “give a hoot for health,” but thought the shopping might be “a sweat.”

Neither family had the money, and the Ferriers no time to hunt around for a suitable houseboat in a suitable situation, but William Ferrier (who, being in commerce, was, of course, a romantic, whereas George Whitstable, the painter, was a realist) had collected literature on the subject, and it was widely read, discussed, and pondered on, and at last a houseboat was selected.

Then came a difficulty. No offer for less than a month would be entertained by the owner. The difficulty seemed insurmountable, for the best offer which the owner would make was that if by the end of June, he had a six weeks’ let to follow immediately upon the tenancy of the Whitstables and Ferriers, he would rent them the houseboat for their fortnight.

The families were in despair. By this time they had set their hearts on a houseboat holiday, but, as Mrs. Ferrier pointed out, if they waited until the end of June and then the houseboat was denied them, it would be too late to book a reasonably priced house at the seaside.

“Then the children can have a tent in the garden and go to the swimming baths every day, and we can all go out for motor-coach trips,” said Mrs. Whitstable, who was not going to allow herself to be worried.

This reasonable attitude apparently inspired Fortune, for at the end of the following week the owner wrote again to say that he had reconsidered the matter, and that, as their references were good, he would let them have the houseboat for their fortnight without reference to any other “lets.”

She was named *Calpurnia* and lay at Stalham in the entrance to Sutton Broad. The two families took a train for North Walsham, changed there on to the single track of the Midland and Great Northern branch line, and were on board *Calpurnia* and in holiday clothes by three o’clock in the afternoon.

The houseboat had her own dinghy, and whilst George Whitstable, his wife, and her sister went off to purchase stores for the weekend, William Ferrier took the children boating and all three bathed.

The weather was fine, and for three or four days enough was found to keep the party interested and on or near the houseboat all the time. By Wednesday, however, the party had decided that a little change would be welcome, and (the holiday, so far, having proved a pound or two less expensive than had been allowed for), William proposed to hire a small

motorboat for the day and cruise upon Barton Broad and down the River Ant and along the Bure as far as Thurne Mouth, where two rivers joined.

By five in the morning of the Thursday in that week when Mrs. Bradley began her investigation of the bungalow murder, young Joan Whitstable, aged eleven, had roused young Gavin Ferrier, aged ten, and they had begun to prepare the breakfast.

Calpurnia was a well-constructed, conveniently arranged houseboat, and had two cabins, each about eight feet square with six feet of headroom. Both were furnished with spring-berths. One cabin, used also as the saloon, had two single berths, one along each side, and a table separating them. The other cabin, having no table, contained one double berth and one single. The Whitstables had this cabin, and little Gavin Ferrier had a mattress on the floor in the other, the table being moved out towards the galley to make room for him.

He and Joan moved the table quietly back as far as they could, went on to the narrow deck, lay on their stomachs, dabbled their hands and splashed their faces, and dried themselves on a roller towel. Then, while Joan cut bread and butter, Gavin sheared the rind off bacon and put the frying pan ready.

When they had done all they could, they roused their protesting parents, and by seven the whole family was at breakfast. At a quarter past eight, goaded by the children, to whom the idea of a day in a motorboat was the wildest excitement imaginable, William and George, smoking pipes, walked ashore from the rear of the *Calpurnia* and set out for the boat-builder's yard at which they hoped to hire their small craft.

Their wives washed up the breakfast things, and the two children, provided with rods cut out of the hedge and furnished with twine and bent pins, sat with their legs dangling over the side of the houseboat and solemnly fished.

A stranger, who passed and then came back and enquired of Mrs. Whitstable, who had finished washing the dishes and was seated in the well knitting whilst her sister put away the plates and cups, whether the houseboat was let at the end of the month, seemed unremarkable enough and proved difficult to identify later.

At half-past nine William and George returned, George at the wheel of a twenty-two foot motor-cruiser of an old pattern but with a good engine, William seated near him in the stern.

The children were enchanted, and insisted upon going aboard at once. Their fathers were no less anxious to be off, as the launch was to be returned to the yard by six o'clock. The women tied scarves round their heads, coats and bathing costumes were stowed in the small cabin, food, ready packed in baskets, was put on board, the camera, three thermos flasks of tea, towels, cigarettes, and sweets were also brought from the houseboat, and off went the little cruiser across Sutton Broad.

The trip was not exciting, nor even particularly interesting at first, except to those who experienced it. The party had lunched at Thurne Mouth. People camping, three or four yachts Bermuda-rigged, the windmill (with enough wind blowing to spin its sails), a houseboat drawn up in a small cut near some willows, proved sufficient to keep the children interested and excited after lunch until, by parental decree, it was permissible to bathe.

The two men, who had already bathed once that day, and were disinclined to pull on damp costumes (for the afternoon, although bright, was fresh and cool), elected to move northward up the river past Thurne village, to moor the cruiser in some convenient spot, and to leave the children in charge of the women whilst they themselves went off to the inn for beer.

It was not quite two o'clock when they went ashore, and they had promised not to be away for more than about an hour.

The children had their swim, were dried and dressed and given chocolate; Mrs. Ferrier poured out for herself and her sister all the tea that remained in the flasks; the children then paddled, dug in the mud with sticks, explored the bank of the river for about a quarter of a mile up-stream and then down, demanded and obtained sweets, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. The wives knitted and gossiped. The clock in the cruiser's galley crept round to a quarter to four.

"What on earth are they doing all this time?" asked Mrs. Ferrier, for the fourth time. Her sister, at ease with sweets and the knitting she had brought with her, looked at her wristwatch, seemed surprised at the time, and then said:

"Having a gossip, you bet. Talk about women being gasbags!" Then she went on knitting. Mrs. Ferrier said:

"They promised we'd have tea in the village, and I could do with mine. Let's leave them a note, and go on with the children and have it. Ten

to one they won't want any. Got a pencil? I haven't."

Mrs. Whitstable hadn't one either, but the small boy Gavin had three, and one of them had a point on it. His mother scribbled in her large, untidy writing on the inside of a torn paper bag, *Gone to have tea.—Ethel*. Then she put it in the middle of the table in the cabin with twopence on it to keep it from blowing away, and the two women and the two children walked into Thurne.

They returned to the cruiser at a quarter to five. The five to seven horsepower engine was capable of developing a speed of about seven miles an hour. The distance from Thurne Mouth along the Bure and up the Ant to Stalham was about nine miles.

"We've cut it fine. I expect George will grouse," said Mrs. Whitstable, as they came in sight of the cruiser. But no impatient and reproachful husbands awaited them, and the scribbled note held down by its copper coins was still in the middle of the table.

"Don't like it much. Something must have happened," said Mrs. Whitstable. Mrs. Ferrier went white, but said that it couldn't have happened to both of them. Mrs. Whitstable agreed, but added that if her sister did not mind being left with the children she would go to the inn, which showed clearly through the trees and was in the opposite direction to the village, and bring George and William back with her.

She reappeared alone some twenty minutes later, just as her sister was becoming really alarmed. She was looking worried and puzzled.

"They're asleep," she said. "It must be the sun, or something in the beer, or something. They are quite all right, the landlord says, but as soon as he wakes them up they just mutter at him and go to sleep again. He doesn't know what to do. I shook George until he rolled out of his chair, but although he woke up and spoke to me, he's dropped right off again, lying there sprawled on the ground. Some men are going to bring them along and put them on board, and, if we have to sleep on this little boat, we do, I suppose. I did feel a fool, I can tell you!"

"That's all very well," said Mrs. Ferrier, "but suppose it's sleepy sickness or something catching?"

"Oh, I'm sure they're not ill. They both look perfectly healthy. The landlord said they had a half-pint each, and then another half-pint, and sat talking, quite pleasantly, with one or two of the men, and then they just dropped off to sleep. He let them sleep until closing time, and then just

locked the doors and left them. They're outside, in deck-chairs, that's one thing."

The kindness of the Norfolk host brought George and William at length—that is to say, just after opening time, when willing hands could be depended upon for transport—to the cruiser, but it was another hour and three-quarters before they were fit to take her back to Stalham. It was dark by the time they arrived at the boat-builder's yard, and their thin-sounding story of having been doped off to sleep at a perfectly respectable and very well-known inn was dismissed with sour smiles by the owner. An extra ten shillings was handed over by William, and he and George, discussing, with annoyance and for the twentieth time, their adventure, went back with the women and children to the houseboat, for it had been felt, in the circumstances, that all speed must be made to return the cruiser, which for the last mile and a half of her journey, had been contravening all laws by being moved after dark, so the *Calpurnia* had been by-passed, and all walked back to her.

It was not far to walk back to the *Calpurnia*, but it was such a dark night that the little party went cautiously along the bank, and then almost missed their craft in the blackness.

George went aboard first, to light the lamps so that the others could see their way. The first thing he did was to fall over a deck-chair, which somebody had left at the foot of the three steps, which led from the after-deck into the cabin. He got up, swearing, and struck a match. A draught blew it out. He struck another, shielding it with his hand, and found his way to the cabin lamp, which was neatly fixed to the wall. He lighted it, shouted cheerily to the rest to come aboard, and passed on into the saloon.

Here the lamp, he knew, was on a shelf at the head of the land-side berth. He pushed his way past the table, struck another match, and lifted down the lamp. The match went out as he turned with the lamp in his hand. He went to place the lamp on the table, where they were accustomed to have it in the evening, but, to his astonishment, the lamp, instead of resting firmly upon the hard and level surface of the table, struck down on to something humped, uneven, and yielding, and crashed down onto the floor.

"Hang it!" said George. "That's very careless of the girls." For the only thought which came into his head at the moment was that the two women must have left some of their gear on the table instead of clearing it away.

The saloon was stinking of paraffin, and, hearing the others come aboard, he yelled out to them to stay where they were, as he had upset the lamp.

“Oh, George! Haven’t you recovered yet?” cried his wife, reproachfully.

“It isn’t my fault!” yelled George. “Some of you have been leaving your muck all over the table, and I went to put the lamp down, and—”

He struck another match to find out the extent of the damage, but again the match went out. There was a store of candles, imported in case of emergency by Mrs. Ferrier, and he called for one to be brought. It was brought by William, who lighted it in the cabin and carried it into the saloon.

“*Good God!*” said William, holding it up and disclosing the heap upon the table.

“Who the devil is it?” asked George, equally disagreeably surprised.

“Job for the police, whoever it is. Look at it,” said William, pointing in a horrified way at the body, which was lying on the table with its legs and arms dangling. There was no need to ask whether it was alive or dead. The throat had been so horridly cut that the head was almost hanging off, and twined into the fearful gash was a rounded snake made of wool, with a wicked little head of leather and two shining beads for its eyes.

“I’ll keep the others out. You go and find a policeman,” said William, backing out with his candle, and beginning to retch.

“Leave me the light, man!” said George. “I’d better clear up this lamp. I’ve smashed the chimney all to blazes.”

“Don’t touch a thing,” counselled William, the romantically minded reader of detective stories. “Leave everything for the police, and come on out.”

George obeyed, but when William had gone in quest of a policeman, George did what might seem, to some, an extraordinary thing. He went into the cabin, met his wife’s enquiring glance with a shrug, looked at the children, who, one on each of the cabin berths, appeared to have fallen asleep, and then beckoned her out on deck. Mrs. Ferrier came with them. George lowered his voice.

“Don’t get jumpy,” he said, “but we seem to have had a visitor during the day, and, not to mince matters, she’s gone and got herself bumped off in the saloon. Very gangsterish. Bill’s gone to fetch the police. Afraid this may

muck up the holiday. Can't leave until the police arrive, of course, but, after they've been, I think you two had better take the kids and spend the night ashore. We must see what we can fix up."

"Is it—horrid, George?" asked his wife.

"Pretty nasty, yes. In fact, I'm going to take a drawing board in there and chart the details. It's given me an idea for a picture."

He went back to the cabin with the women and drew out his drawing board from under the berth on which his daughter was sleeping. He found a selection of sticks of charcoal, and went back with a couple of candles into the reeking saloon. It then occurred to him that there was no blood on the floor. The body had been dumped on the houseboat, not killed there. This, needless to say, was a relief.

He propped up his board, selected a stick of the soft and feathery charcoal, and went to work.

• CHAPTER 8 •

“There’s certainly too much pepper in that soup!” Alice said to herself, as well as she could for sneezing.

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“That’s a very odd tale,” said Mrs. Bradley, at the termination of the second visit of George Whitstable and William Ferrier to the police. She had been watching them closely, as they retold the tale for her benefit.

“You’re telling me, ma’am!” the inspector, emphatically agreed.

“Thank you very much, gentlemen,” he added, nodding to the sergeant to show them out. “If they hadn’t had that alibi with the landlord at Thurne, I’d say that one or both of them knew more about it than they pretend; but if they were asleep, doped out, all afternoon, and didn’t get back until after dark, it’s a bit difficult to see what they could have had to do with it,” he went on. “But we’re keeping an eye on them. Of course, they seem respectable, but you never know with murder. Look at the Seddons and Crippen; look at Madeleine Smith; look at Norman Thorne...Murder isn’t like burglary, where you’ve usually got the criminal on record.”

“Imagining, for the sake of argument,” said Mrs. Bradley, “that they are innocent of any possible complicity in the murder, *could* their beer have been doped like that at a public house?”

“That’s what I’m going to find out,” replied the inspector. He did not invite her companionship and collaboration, and she did not offer it. Instead she asked,

“What happens now to that holiday party, I wonder?”

“Got the offer of a houseboat at Horning,” the inspector replied, “but they say they’ve had enough of houseboats. They’re going up to Cromer, to put in a week at the seaside, if they can get accommodation, I believe.”

“When do they go?”

“Packing up today. Leaving by the four-fifteen from Stalham to North Walsham. Of course, I’m keeping a pretty close watch on them, as I don’t mind telling you.”

“I think I may be in time to catch them,” said Mrs. Bradley. “There are one or two questions I should like to put to the wives, if you have no objection.”

“None whatever, ma’am. But I doubt whether they’ve anything more to tell. Unless, of course—two men would fit with what we know of that bungalow business.”

Mrs. Bradley grinned, and told George to drive her to Acle, and thence to Stokesby Old Windmill, where she had arranged to pick up her three students, for whom she had claimed exemption from any more police surveillance.

Laura, Kitty, and the faithful Alice had drawn up the *Dithyramb* on the left bank of the River Bure and on the Muck Fleet side of the ferry. Here the secondary road, which George had taken at Wey Bridge, a mile and a bit outside Acle, having crossed Muck Fleet, came almost to the edge of the water. George stopped the car, and Mrs. Bradley got out.

“I say,” said Laura, “you’ve heard about the second murder, I suppose? It was in the morning paper.”

“Quick work,” commented Kitty. “How rotten for the people on the houseboat.”

“I want to see them,” said Mrs. Bradley, “and the easiest way will be on the water, if you’ve no objection to running me up to Stalham.”

The *Dithyramb*, with twice the speed of the small cruiser hired by the Ferriers and Whitstables, made easy work of the trip up the Bure to Abbey Gate, and so up the Ant to Barton Broad. Laura, smiling happily, went at a fair speed through Barton Broad, but slowed down again for the narrow river and the cut, which took the cruiser into Sutton Broad. The passage to Stalham was by the western side of the Broad, and, upon coming into the narrow arm of the Broad, which came nearest to Stalham, they soon saw *Calpurnia* and moored the cruiser close to her.

The two children saw the *Dithyramb* as soon as Laura brought her in to the bank. Kitty invited them aboard, but Joan Whitstable, taking Gavin by the arm, shook her head.

“I’d love to, thank you, but we mustn’t, unless our mothers say we may.”

“Where do you live?”

“On this houseboat, but we’re moving.”

“Oh, are you? Going home?”

“No. Seaside, I think. But I’d rather stay on the houseboat, and so would Gavin.”

“Yes,” said Gavin, breaking a well-preserved silence.

“Well, go in and ask your mothers whether you can come on board our boat.”

The two children disappeared, and Laura enquired,

“When do you want to board her and beard the parents?”

“When the children are out of the way, child.”

“What sort of people are they?”

Mrs. Bradley described the two men, and by the time she had finished the children returned from *Calpurnia*’s saloon escorted by William Ferrier.

“Ah, it’s you,” he said, recognising Mrs. Bradley. “That’s all right, then. Only, of course, we’re rather nervous.”

“Naturally,” Mrs. Bradley agreed. “I wonder whether you would allow these girls of mine to take charge of the children for half an hour whilst I come along to your houseboat and ask a lot of impertinent questions?”

It turned out that the Whitstables and the Ferriers were only too willing to talk about their strange and horrid experience. Mrs. Bradley listened for a bit to the pleasant, deep tones of the artist, the excited tenor of the clerk, the lazy voice of Mrs. Whitstable (whom she suspected of being the most intelligent of the party), and the nervous volubility of Mrs. Ferrier. Then she began to put her questions.

“Who could possibly have known that you were going off for the day like that?”

“Well, the police asked that. I suppose any of the people at the boat-builder’s yard could have heard. We made no secret of it, naturally.”

“Had you mentioned it to anybody on the previous day?—at the local public house, for instance?”

“The police asked that, too. I can’t remember, but it’s perfectly likely.”

“You didn’t get into conversation with any particular person about it?—Anybody who seemed especially interested?”

“I may have asked—in fact, I did ask, now I come to think—whether they hired out motorboats by the day or only for a period, but I don’t know who I said it to. We were all standing at the counter—about seven or eight

men—waiting for beer—and I asked the chap behind the bar. He didn't get a chance to answer—it's coming back to me now—because two or three informed me. They all put me on to the chap from whom we hired the boat the next day."

"The trouble about these bigger villages on the Broads is that, at this time of year, they are so full of strangers that people don't get noticed and remembered as they would in the winter," Mrs. Bradley remarked. "Now, about your strange experience at Thurne. When could the drug—whatever it was—have been put into the beer, do you think?"

William and George glanced at one another.

"The police asked that, too," said the former. "It must have been put in the second glass, not the first, and that's as much as we know. You see, the first glass was drawn, paid for, handed over, and we both just swiped it off, standing at the bar, we were so thirsty. Then we ordered another, and asked to have it brought outside. Well, we went out to sit on one of the benches, and then—they were doing a bit of yacht racing, you know, at Thurne Mouth, and several yachts in a fresh breeze were coming down from Potter Heigham—a lovely sight—we went down nearer the water to have a look at them. When we came back the beers were there, and the boy who'd brought them was there, too, but he'd strolled to the river-edge with us, because I saw him."

"So the two half-pints were left on a table outside the inn, and anybody who had come prepared to do so could have slipped something into the glasses without much fear of being seen," said Mrs. Bradley. "And, of course, you can't possibly know whether you were followed from here to Thurne Mouth, can you?"

"No reason why we should have been followed, actually," said Mrs. Whitstable. "Much safer for the man to have gone to Thurne Mouth by car. I don't know whether my husband mentioned that was where we were going, but I daresay he did."

"There was that man who went by along the bank while George and William were at the boat-builder's yard," said Mrs. Ferrier, looking at her sister.

"But I didn't tell *him* where we were going. I didn't know," protested Mrs. Whitstable, "and he certainly didn't ask. That was while George and Bill had gone to hire the boat."

"Did you mention him to the police?" asked Mrs. Bradley.

“No. I didn’t think of him until Jane mentioned him just now. Anyhow, we didn’t tell him anything. He asked whether the houseboat would be to let at the end of the month.”

“Can you describe him, Mrs. Whitstable?”

“Not very well. He was just like everybody else—tweed jacket, open-necked shirt, flannel trousers, no hat, aged about thirty, I should think.”

“Thin? Tall?”

“No. Medium. Not noticeable in any way, I’m sure.”

“Probably as innocent as he seemed. Did he come right past the houseboat and walk on towards the Broad?”

“I don’t remember noticing, but I think he must have done, because he did walk past that way first, as though he’d come from the village, and then came back the few yards to speak to me. I was knitting, and I was a bit annoyed when he came back because I’d just begun to count my stitches.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bradley vaguely. She and the husbands and wives were seated in deck-chairs on top of the houseboat. She touched the wooden edge of her chair. “Is this what Mr. Whitstable fell over when he went down the steps to the cabin?” she asked. “I should like to see how that happened. I assume that the chair was not left at the bottom of the steps when you went off for your outing?”

“It certainly wasn’t,” agreed Mrs. Whitstable, “although, of course, we didn’t expect to have to come back in the dark. But there was no reason for a chair to *be* at the bottom of the steps. They are kept here on deck, folded up, and covered with a tarpaulin.”

“We most religiously put them away after use,” asserted William Ferrier, “and, in any case, they are only used up here. The lockers form seats on the after-deck and also in the well. If we did move the deck-chairs it would only be if we wanted to go ashore and sit on the bank, and we certainly haven’t done that.”

He led the way down the boat’s ladder on to the narrow deck, and round to the broader after-deck and down three steps to the cabin. George Whitstable followed, carrying a deck-chair, and placed it where he had his tumble in the dark.

“Just about there,” he said.

“Do you know which chair it was?”

“No. I picked it up—it was folded, of course—and stood it up on end against the wardrobe.”

"But *you* didn't put it back with the others on the roof?"

"No."

"I did that," said William, "but I couldn't say now which chair it was."

"You would have put it on top of the pile?"

"Oh, yes."

"That would have been this morning?"

"Yes. One couldn't see to cart deck-chairs about last night."

"Quite so. Let us go into the saloon for a minute, please, and then we will return to the roof and see whether we cannot decide which chair it was."

They passed through the cabin and into the saloon.

"The police have taken the table away," said William. Mrs. Bradley betrayed no disappointment at this, but looked at the shelf which had supported the lamp (afterwards broken by George) and then went back and looked at the cabin lamp on its support.

"The police took fingerprints," said George, "including ours. Asked if we minded. Purposes of comparison, they said. Perfectly right, of course. Haven't seen the papers since we've been on the Broads, but understand there's been another murder not far away, and they're trying to find out whether there's a maniac at work. Just as glad we're clearing out, if there is. The girls will be glad to quit, and there are the children to think of."

"Are you working with the police?" asked William. Mrs. Bradley explained her very slight connection with the police, described Amos Bleriot, and suggested that if they saw anyone answering to the description it might be in the public interest to inform the superintendent at Norwich.

"And now," she said, "I wish you would try to remember in what order those chairs were set out. When I arrived, you two were sitting up here, I think, and Mrs. Whitstable and Mrs. Ferrier were below."

"Yes, I was packing and Ethel was keeping an eye on the children," said Mrs. Ferrier.

"Right. Then that means that either Mr. Whitstable or Mr. Ferrier is sitting on the chair which had been placed at the bottom of the steps. Which chair came off the pile first?"

"George's," said William Ferrier. "I remember, because I put them out, and I put his out first, and then placed one for myself."

"Get up, please, Mr. Whitstable," said Mrs. Bradley. The chair was covered in red, white, and green striped canvas. Mrs. Bradley took out her

magnifying glass and looked it over very carefully, watched curiously by the others. Then she straightened up, asked George to fold up the chair, requested permission to take it away with her, thanked them all, in her beautiful voice, for their patience, hoped she had not hindered their departure, and went back, very thoughtful, to the cruiser, George following her on board with the deck-chair.

When the children had returned to the houseboat, and the *Dithyramb*, at Mrs. Bradley's request, was cruising very slowly down the Ant, she sat in the little saloon with an ordnance map of the district spread out on the table, tracing with a yellow claw the roads from Stalham to Thurne.

There did not seem the slightest chance that anyone in a car could even have sighted the little cruiser on its trip to Thurne Mouth, let alone kept it in sight. The roads, for the most part, were well away from the river except where a secondary road from Ludham to Horning crossed the Ant by Ludham Bridge.

At Ludham Bridge her yellow finger paused. She studied the map again with a new idea in mind. Then she went into the cockpit, and told Laura to put about and make all speed back to the houseboat.

"You know, there's something a bit *Ancient Mariner* about Mrs. Croc.," Laura confided to Alice, as, the *Dithyramb* having been coaxed round, she opened the throttle and they began to cruise northward again.

"She's got the skinny hand and the compelling eye, certainly," agreed Alice. Kitty, who was sprawled on the roof of the saloon, took no part in their conversation, but a deep chuckle from the interior of the saloon, where Mrs. Bradley was still studying the map, caused the dialogue to come to an abrupt conclusion.

They were destined not to go far, however. Mrs. Bradley came out of the saloon, map in hand, and joined Kitty on the saloon-top.

"Look out for the Hundred Dike," she said, pointing to the map. Kitty bent closer to follow the yellow forefinger.

"You can't enter it," said Kitty. "Dog was talking about it the other day. It ought to be a cut across to the other river, but it's choked with reeds, and you can't use it."

"No wonder I didn't notice it as we came by before," said Mrs. Bradley. "That settles that, then."

Her idea had been that anybody stationed on Ludham Bridge could have seen whether the two families in their little cruiser had taken the

Hundred Dike in mistake for the eastward course of the River Bure, and a car travelling from the bridge past Hall Common and Coldharbour Farm could have arrived at the conjunction of the dike with the River Thurne before the cruiser got there, and so the direction taken by the families southward down the Thurne to Thurne Mouth could have been determined without the difficulty of following them all the way by water, with the risk, all the time, of being noticed.

But if the Hundred Dike were impassable because of weed or reeds, this theory fell to the ground, and they must have been followed all the way by water, after all. This being the case, it was clear that none of them had had any idea that their cruiser was being shadowed.

To satisfy herself on the point, she had Laura take the *Dithyramb* as far as the Hundred Dike, which was about four hundred yards below Ludham Bridge, but there was no doubt that the dike could not be used. It seemed as though Ferrier or Whitstable must have mentioned where they were going to spend the day. In that case any one of perhaps a couple of dozen men, all practically untraceable if they were summer visitors, could have received this information, and one, at least, must have acted on it.

Mrs. Bradley left the *Dithyramb* at Stokesby Old Windmill, and returned to Norwich in the car. The deck-chair, handled by the chauffeur's gloved fingers, was on the back seat.

"If you want to do me a favour," she had said before she stepped ashore, "you'll moor in the staithe which goes close to the inn about half a mile outside Acle." She pointed it out on the map. "I may need your assistance tomorrow. But if I'm a nuisance, say so, and go off and enjoy your holiday. Oh, and all three keep together as much as you can."

The girls, who were in the enviable position of having left no holiday address with their relatives, and so were unaware that their parents were almost frantic with worry to know that they were in a district where two disgusting and terrifying murders had taken place, assured her that they would not miss any of the fun for worlds. Kitty, who found the Broads rather boring, was particularly grateful for Mrs. Bradley's manoeuvres, and said so. Laura proclaimed an outbreak of detective fever, and the mild Alice, always the quietest of the three, was heard to murmur, "Much more fun," in convinced and convincing tones.

"And," said Laura, when Mrs. Bradley had gone, "if my brother is a man of his word, there ought to be something for us at Acle with which I

propose to receive cavalry, if any. So, while you two get supper, I'm going along to the post-office, and we shall see what we shall see. I sent off a sisterly telegram after we found the first corpse."

She went ashore at the inn, walked the half-mile or so into Acle along the main road, went in the post-office, and returned to the cruiser with a couple of parcels.

"Left to be called for," she said, when the others, who seemed to have been nervous about her, welcomed her back to supper. "Good old Colin. Atta boy!"

She unwrapped the parcels. One contained three handy pieces of stout rubber tubing filled with lead at one end, and the other proved to be a linen bag full of crushed charcoal.

"Commando stuff," said Laura appreciatively, swinging one of the coshes. "If we can't do a bit of murderer-hunting with these in our good right hands and a smear of charcoal across our innocent mugs, I shall be greatly surprised."

Her forethought and enterprise, as usual, left Alice speechless; but that gentle maiden, taking a cosh in a thin but muscular hand, calculated its weight, and her own added reach, with a nice appreciation of their possibilities. Kitty left the third cosh alone, but observed, in admiring tones, "Oh, Dog, you *are* an ass," before bringing the supper to the table.

• CHAPTER 9 •

“...and, burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“No, ma’am, we never thought twice about that deck-chair,” confessed the Inspector. “You know what people are. Careless. If they’d all sworn on the Book they hadn’t left it at the bottom of the companion-way I don’t know that I should have believed them. Careless. That’s what people are.”

“But not so much with two active children about,” said Mrs. Bradley. “And painters are often untidy but seldom careless. And clerks are not usually careless. As for mothers—So I thought the chair worth bringing, and when you have compared all the fingerprints on it with those in your possession, I do hope you will find one set which corresponds in every particular with those made on shiny-surfaced cards in my consulting room by our friend Mr. Amos Bleriot.”

“One up to you, that will be, ma’am, and I’ll be accordingly grateful. Now, how do you reckon they were followed so that the beer could be doped?”

“I don’t know. But, really, with so many craft on the rivers and Broads, there can’t have been much difficulty. They admit that any number of people could have known where they were going if they chose.”

Matters were in this interesting but, to Mrs. Bradley, totally unsatisfactory condition, when the news was received that the first body had been identified. Scotland Yard, accustomed to spreading its formidable dragnet over the ramifications of the London police district, had brought to the surface the fact that one Maudie Sitter, a drab, had been missing from her usual haunts for a fortnight, and the body had been identified by two men, a woman, and two constables, all brought from the Shaftesbury

Avenue district for the purpose. It was established that the woman came from the East End, but had a “pitch” just off Gerrard Street.

The evidence was so positive that the witnesses were also shown the second body, and the two constables thought that they recognised it as being that of another streetwalker named Duke. This assumption was checked, and the woman proved to have been in prison twice. This last fact took Mrs. Bradley’s mind back three whole years to the murder of Minnie Baum. She also had been in prison twice. She made a mental note of the coincidence, and a tiny question mark at the back of her conscious thought about the case became an exciting note of exclamation. For no very good reason, she was no longer working in the dark.

There was further information to be had concerning both women, the inspector reported with lugubrious triumph. Both Sitter and Duke had been employed for some time during the previous year at a questionable West End club. That again evoked memories of Baum and her murderer Bone.

“In what sense questionable?” Mrs. Bradley wanted to know.

“Well, ma’am....” The inspector produced a drawing. “Would that convey anything to your mind?”

Mrs. Bradley accepted the crude sketch with considerable interest. It was the drawing of a roughly shaped pentagram. Above it there was a star. Surrounding it were two circles, and between them came some ill-formed Greek characters and what looked like part of the Runic alphabet.

Mrs. Bradley studied all this thoughtfully. Then she handed it back.

“Have you ever heard of Satanists?” she enquired. The inspector permitted himself to smile.

“Devil-worshippers, ma’am, do you mean?”

“In quite a literal sense, yes. Satanists believe that the fullness of the earth is not the Lord’s, but belongs by right to the fallen archangel Lucifer. Him they worship, believing that to ascribe to him the power and the glory will assist him in obtaining them. They are, in fact, of the opinion of Joe the Tinker, but usually choose to express their theory more elaborately and in much less charming form.”

“Joe the Tinker, ma’am?” said the inspector.

“Yes. Don’t you remember his conversation with Raffy? Unfortunately,” she added, “whereas Joe considered that Lucifer was a ‘fine angel wid all his talents gone astray on him,’ and asked, ‘Isn’t he wan of God’s sons, the second and prodigal son?’ the Satanists have another

thought on the subject. They worship him as though he were God Himself, and their faith is rooted in the belief that he can be made the god of the earth, and that the earth should be his patrimony.”

The inspector looked serious.

“Blasphemy, ma’am, you mean?”

“Coupled with various horrid practices,” rejoined Mrs. Bradley, with equal solemnity.

“And you think these women were mixed up in something of the sort, ma’am? I should hardly think they would be.... Oh, not that I mean they’d be above it normally, ma’am. Just that they wouldn’t have those kind of ideas. It’s only educated people go in for that sort of muck.”

“But the educated people need as much assistance in carrying out the Black Mass, as it is, I believe, popularly called, as ever a priest does in carrying out the true service. They have their acolytes, for instance, their consecrated wafer used to unconsecrated ends, their apostate priest, and, in some cases, their sacrificial victim.”

“Meaning these women were victims, ma’am?”

“No, not in the sense you imply.”

“Well, there seem deep waters to me, ma’am. But I take it that if we could lay hands on these Satanists we’d have laid hands on the murderers. Is that so?”

“I think so. Were they known to the police?”

“Unfortunately, no, ma’am. The opinion at the Yard is that somebody probably quite respectable was at the head of it all; perhaps somebody trying experiments, like these spiritualists do. They certainly don’t think it’s anybody who’s ever been in trouble.”

“Did they ever raid this particular club?”

“Only for liquor, ma’am. It was later they got wind of the goings-on, it seems, but nothing was ever proved, and the only person they interviewed was the so-called manager, a bloke named Larry the Dukes, an ex-pug. Nothing against him, so far as they knew; no liquor on the premises, no proof of drinking out of hours; they had to give it up. They kept an eye on the place, and it closed within a month. Larry the Dukes said it didn’t pay, and that was all they could get. And, anyway, as I say, it was about a year ago.”

“Interesting,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Ah, well! We must get on with what we’ve got, I suppose, but I’ll telephone Detective Inspector Pirberry about

this club. It might be very important. The card on which Amos Bleriot drew that seven-pointed star could be connected, without doubt, with such a place.”

The murderer Bone had belonged to a similar club, she remembered. She returned to her hotel and telephoned her nephew, Jonathan Bradley. She had received a letter from him suggesting that he would like to spend a holiday on the Broads after all, and would be glad to join her. Her reply was an enthusiastic acceptance of his offer. Then she rang up Scotland Yard, and, within reasonable time, was connected to Detective Inspector Pirberry.

The conversation was not particularly illuminating, but one thing pleased her. This was that Pirberry himself expected, sooner or later, to be sent to Norfolk to assist in elucidating the mystery of the deaths of the two drabs.

“Nothing in Satanism about murdering such women, ma’am, is there?” he enquired, when they discussed the Satanist sketches and the club, which the Norwich inspector had mentioned. “And in any case, the women haven’t been there for nearly a year.”

“Quite,” said Mrs. Bradley. “And, of course, as you say, murder is not a part of the usual Satanist ritual, which consists largely in such puerilities as the Black Mass and the crucifixion of toads.”

“Quite,” said Pirberry, in his turn. Mrs. Bradley rang off, and returned to her notes of the two cases for purposes of study and comparison. Two minds, she decided, possibly with but a single thought, but most certainly guiding two different dexterities, had carried out the murders.

The bungalow body, as they had decided, for convenience, to call it, had been stabbed through the heart. Unless it had been merely a lucky chance—and the odds were enormous against that—nothing but years of practice and a pretty complete knowledge of anatomy could have made such a shrewd blow possible. She thought of the “hex-murders” referred to in the case of Bone, and reflected that “hex-suicides” were not uncommon, either. Granted the establishment of a moral ascendancy over the mentality of the victim, suggestion could do the rest. She was not altogether convinced, in spite of the presence of the worsted viper in the wound, that Maudie Sitter had not been alone when that knife had penetrated her heart. There were those tiny puncture marks.

Witchcraft was still a term of sinister significance, even though its power derived more from psychology than from materialisation of Satan

and his ministers. The exploitation of subconscious fears in a victim could be devilment itself.

Her mind switched to a consideration of the body found on the houseboat, the throat cut from one ear to the other. This had been a particularly messy murder. She tried to imagine—for she had seen this second body too—the position of the head when the murder had been carried out, if, again, murder it had been. Suicide by throat-cutting was not uncommon.

But, assuming (on the evidence of the vipers) that both women had indeed been murdered, it was reasonable, she thought, to assume that two murderers might have been at work. This ruled out the possibility (so lovingly envisaged by the inspector, it seemed) that the murders were those of an homicidal maniac.

Apart from the fact that murderers are far more apt to repeat their effects than to kill by two different methods, there was also the fact (for the police had made a number of practical experiments) that it was very difficult for one man to carry a body onto the houseboat and into the cabin in the dark, quietly enough not to have roused the people on board the other craft which were lying near the houseboat's moorings. These holiday visitors had been questioned closely by the police, and had been able to affirm that they had heard nothing untoward on the night of the murder.

It was considered likely by the police that the body had been conveyed to the houseboat by water, for it was certain, as Whitstable had noted, that the woman's assailant or assailants had already killed her before she had been taken on board. But what puzzled Mrs. Bradley was the fact that they should have taken such risk of discovery, for, apart from the fact that the *Calpurnia* was moored less than fifteen yards from craft on either side of her, the time-limit to which the murderer or murderers had had to work must have been extremely small.

At that time of year it was not really dark until well after ten o'clock, and Mr. Ferrier and Mr. Whitstable had been doped comparatively early in the afternoon—so early that it was a nice point whether they might not have recovered sufficiently to bring their motorboat back an hour or so earlier than they did, in which case they would have been on board before dark and the murderer might not have found it possible to dump the body on their houseboat.

She had a theory (which she did not disclose to the police, since it was incapable of proof) that the time-limit had been so short that if Ferrier and Whitstable had put their wives and children on board *Calpurnia* before they returned the motorboat to the yard instead of afterwards, they might have caught the murderer in the act of leaving the houseboat.

Her theory, indeed, had expanded into a quaint conception that the doping had not been done by the murderer or murderers at all, since it had obviously been done so much too early. On the other hand, there was the point that it might have been done at the only possible time because that time presented the only possible opportunity.

The risk involved in dumping the body was so great, however, that she was inclined to set considerable store by her theory. A point, too, which could not be overlooked, and which had been put by the inspector, was that the hiring of the houseboat during that odd fortnight might have complicated matters for the murderer. He should have been able (by all the customs of letting such craft during the summer months) to count upon the fact that since the *Calpurnia* had not been let for the whole of the month, she would not have been let at all. It would have been easy enough to get a list of all houseboats which had not been let for the period under review, and the sudden change of front on the part of the owner might have been against all the murderer's calculations.

In that case, Mrs. Bradley thought, it would have been simpler to scrap the plan of using *Calpurnia* as a dumping-ground for the body, and the fact that this had not been done suggested either extraordinary stupidity on the part of the murderers, or (as she was far more inclined to believe—for, although she thought the murderers reckless, she was far from thinking them stupid) an absolute determination to place the body where it had been found.

Following out this idea, one salient fact emerged. For a considerable area around each spot where a body had been found, no craft were mooring at nights. The murderer, or, as she had convinced herself, the murderers, had contrived to clear a considerable length of waterway all night long. Craft cruised and moored in the neighbourhood during daybreak, but sheered off at night to safer parking-places.

It occurred to Mrs. Bradley, not for the first time, that, in this land of waters, what she needed was a cruiser of her own with someone conversant with the countryside to pilot it for her. It seemed a shame to spoil the

students' holiday by getting them to ferry her about the Broads, keen though the girls might be on detective work. Besides, she had her own reasons for wishing them well out of the affair. She disliked the sulphur-stink of Satanism, which seemed to hang over the business. If her nephew would join her, his partnership would be ideal from her point of view. He was a keen yachtsman, but had not the yachtsman's slight contempt for power-craft.

She decided to meet the girls early next morning and tell them that it would be more convenient if she had her own boat to run about in. Knowing them well, she was determined not to enlarge upon the possible dangers of remaining in the neighbourhood, but she would reiterate her previous plea that all three should keep together as far as possible.

She returned to her researches. The more she thought about both the murders, the more certain she became that the murderers, far from wishing to hide the bodies, had gone out of their way to place them where they would be discovered almost immediately.

This was obvious, of course, in the case of the houseboat body; it had been rather more subtly worked in the case of the bungalow body, where the natural curiosity of the students had been cleverly allowed for and exploited, but there was little doubt in her mind, when at last she packed away her notes and references, that, whatever their purpose in taking so much risk, the murderers were deliberately flirting with fate for some reason which she could not guess. It intrigued her curiosity intensely. It was as though the murderers were issuing a challenge to the police.

During the night she woke with the thought in her conscious mind that the challenge was not only to the police—was perhaps not primarily to the police. Possibly the selection of the students as the discoverers of the first body had not been fortuitous, but was part of the plot.

She was, in spite of an international reputation and an uncanny skill in hitting the nail on the head, a modest person. She therefore felt inclined to chide herself for the conceit which could assume that it might be herself who was being challenged; that her students had been singled out because through them she could be most easily involved; but the idea persisted. The two anonymous letters she had received gave some sort of colour to what seemed at first a wild and extraordinary idea. "But, of course," she argued with herself, "this business of involving me through the students makes sense only if they really do want the bodies to be found without delay."

She was justified by the third body. When that came to light there seemed no longer any doubt as to what was the intention of the murderers.

• CHAPTER 10 •

“...and half believed herself in Wonderland.”

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass* by
Lewis Carroll.

With the determination to carry out her plan of getting the students out of the “sordid atmosphere of crime,” as Laura put it later, Mrs. Bradley drove to the spot where she had arranged to meet them, and put it to them squarely that she thought her nephew Jonathan might be of more use to her in the near future than they could be. She thanked them heartily for their help, begged them to keep out of mischief, and bade them, if they valued her peace of mind, to keep together if they were determined to finish their holiday on the Broads.

They grinned and produced the coshes supplied by Laura’s affectionate brother Colin, and the sight of these comforted Mrs. Bradley more than they could know.

“We’re going to use them, too, if we get a chance,” said Laura. She stretched out an arm which a youthful blacksmith might have envied, and added, with a chuckle, “After all, the weaker sex can always claim to have fought in self-defence.”

By the end of the day Jonathan Bradley had joined his aunt on the Broads, and, before dark, was at the wheel of a new, fast motor-cruiser called *O’Reilly*. After considerable argument, he said, he thought he had managed to get his wife Deborah off to her people in Scotland, but she had refused, at the last, to leave him, saying that before anything happened she was going to follow him to the Broads.

“I know she’ll be in the way,” he concluded sadly. “Not very nice, this particular case of yours, is it?”

“I’m afraid not. I wish you’d been able to persuade Deborah to keep out. I wish I could send Laura and her friends away from here, but I can

scarcely dictate to them where they shall spend their holiday.”

“No, I suppose not,” said Jonathan. “You can’t do any more tonight, can you? We’ve taken a room at your hotel. I thought we might leave this outfit somewhere handy, all stay the night at the hotel, and come aboard again first thing tomorrow morning.”

Mrs. Bradley fell in with these reasonable suggestions, and they ran the cruiser from Potter Heigham, where she had been hired, to Wroxham, and moored her there.

She lay opposite a white-painted, red-roofed boathouse with her stern to the dark trees, which looked almost black in the fast-fading light.

It was a very short drive into Norwich, and Deborah looked, thought Mrs. Bradley, with a motherly pride which she scarcely recognised in herself (for she had never had a daughter), all the better for being married.

“Here you are at last,” said Deborah. “Dinner has been on for nearly half an hour, and I’m frightfully hungry.”

She was much less nervous since her marriage, Mrs. Bradley had noticed. She was also lovelier than ever, and had lost that little concentrated frown of anxiety which constant supervision of the young is apt to write on even the most philosophical of brows. Deborah was anything but philosophical, as both Mrs. Bradley and her nephew had cause to know.

Mrs. Bradley had wondered often, since she had engineered the match, exactly how the marriage would turn out. Her nephew, she was relieved and amused to note, appeared to have asserted himself with the simple, beautiful, selfish, and comforting decisiveness for which his mother, Mrs. Bradley’s sister-in-law, was celebrated throughout the family, and which it had been evident for some time her son had inherited in full measure.

Dinner over, they sat in the lounge talking of everything but the business in which Mrs. Bradley was engaged.

At ten, Jonathan glanced at the clock as though to reproach it for going so slowly, and then at his watch as though surprised to find it in collusion with the clock. Then he glanced hopefully at his wife.

“You can’t want to go to bed yet,” she said defensively.

“Can’t I?” he said. “Come on.”

Their room overlooked a quiet alley. Deborah, instead of getting into bed when she was ready, stood by the window, from which she had drawn back the curtains, and looked out into the night.

Jonathan came and stood behind her. He put his hands beneath her breasts and drew her back against him until he could fold his arms over and around her, and her whole body was supported against his. She sighed, abandoning her mood and giving way to his.

“Well,” he said, “what’s the matter?”

Deborah put her hands over his forearms and rested her head against his shoulder.

“Is Aunt Adela in any danger?”

“Yes. That’s why I didn’t want you to stay.”

“Don’t bother about me. I shall keep out of your way.”

“But I do bother about you. I can’t help it. Won’t you go home again tomorrow? We’re only going about on a boat.”

“Shall I cramp her style? Would she be better off without me?”

“Well, that’s for her to say.”

“And, although she’s said lots of things, she hasn’t said that,” said Deborah.

“No, she hasn’t. Come on to bed. You’ll get cold.” He picked her up in his arms. “It’s a horrible case. All witchcraft and subterranean sort of stuff. Two women have been killed already, and I happen to know she thinks there will be at least a third. She says there’s no end to this sort of thing, once it breaks out in a district. Witchcraft can be as bad in England as in West Africa, and it’s just as hard to track down. She says it’s crazy and frightening.”

“It doesn’t frighten me,” said Deborah, putting her arms round his neck. She woke in the night and said, “What is witchcraft, anyway? I thought it died out two hundred years ago.”

“It will never die out,” said Jonathan, “and it’s as universal as Satan. Our revered but fat-headed ancestors did nothing but drive it underground. Most of the poor crones they burnt and drowned weren’t witches at all in the true sense of the word.”

“But they used to confess they were,” said Deborah. “Not that I agree with killing them.”

“Real witchcraft isn’t love-potions and village spells. It’s the ruin of minds, the ascendancy of one mentality over another, the establishment of a sort of hypnotic control to make a person evil instead of good. It’s naked Satanism, and she says this whole case stinks of it. And she isn’t exactly

afraid, because I don't believe you could frighten her, but she's worried. So if she tells you you must go home, you're to go, and you're not to argue."

"I've never argued."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"Well, only before we were married."

"Anyhow, don't argue now. Go to sleep."

Deborah relaxed in his arms with that wonderful, almost light-headed sense of having no worries, which she had learned since their first night together. Very soon she was asleep.

By ten next morning they were all on board *O'Reilly*. Mrs. Bradley, who had already rung up the police station only to be informed that no further clues had come to light, suggested that, as George could remain in touch with the police in Norwich, they might as well have a quiet day cruising.

She herself had a very quiet day indeed, for she spent the whole afternoon and the early evening on one of the berths in the saloon. The lovers spent most of the day lounging. Occasionally they went overboard for a lazy swim. By nightfall no message had come, and the party went to bed, languid from the heat and drowsy with the effects of the sun.

At five in the morning Jonathan woke, leaned up on his elbow, listened to the regular breathing of his wife from the opposite berth, and quietly got out of bed. He pulled on trousers and a sweater over his pyjamas and went up on deck.

It was already light, and he saw his aunt seated on the cabin-top contemplating the faint dawn colours of the water and a clear and tender sky.

"I thought so," he said. "Have you been up all night?"

"Yes," Mrs. Bradley replied. "For I am in the unenviable position of the prophet Elijah; you remember they sought his life to take it away." She gave a sudden harsh cackle, and some wild geese, nesting near, rose, with an almost similar sound, and took breathlessly beautiful flight across the water.

"I hope I didn't wake Deborah," said Mrs. Bradley contritely. "I shouldn't have laughed aloud."

The hope was vain. Deborah, rubbing sleep from her eyes, came up on deck in her pyjamas, and shivered in the cold morning air. Jonathan took off

his sweater and put it round her, tying the sleeves round her neck. She huddled into the warmth of it, but he laughed and said:

“You go and turn in, Aunt Adela. We’re going to have a swim.”

“I’m not,” said Deborah. “It’s much too cold.”

Mrs. Bradley went below. As soon as she had disappeared, Jonathan threw off the rest of his clothes, took his wife in an iron grip and untied the sleeves of the sweater.

“Beast! I hate you!” cried Deborah. “I won’t be undressed!”

“Yes, you will, and like it,” replied the implacable young man. “There you are. Now get in quick, or you really will get cold. Over the side and no finking. It isn’t deep enough to dive.”

In another moment they were both in the water, swimming, gasping, splashing, laughing, and blowing.

“My hair!” cried Deborah. “I haven’t got a cap on.”

They came out at the end of about ten minutes, and Jonathan picked up two bath-towels from the locker where he had laid them. He gave his wife one, and commenced to dry her with the other.

“Don’t hug the towel up to your neck like that,” he said. “Get on and dry your face and hair.”

“You scrub too hard,” protested Deborah, trying to wriggle away.

“Rot. It’ll keep you warm. Work harder yourself, you lazy little devil, or I’ll warm you in a different way.”

“My arms ache,” said Deborah, twisting her towel round her head and leaning against him. “How wet you are, darling. Dry yourself for a change.”

Jonathan laughed.

“Come on down to the cabin,” he said. “We are both dry enough to finish down there.”

When they came up again the sun was up, too, and the flush of golden morning was over the water.

“Going to be hot again,” said Jonathan. Deborah drew in her breath.

“Isn’t it lovely!” she said. “Oh, I am glad I stayed.”

Jonathan sat down on the cabin-top, his long legs wide part, and drew her down to sit between his knees. He pulled her against him, oblivious of her damp hair against his jacket.

“I suppose,” said Deborah, rather wistfully, “we shall never be quite as happy as this when we get older.”

“Why look into the future?” demanded her husband. “Time for that when it comes.” He loosened his hold, pushed her away, and then put his feet close and pulled her onto his knees. “What a baby you are,” he said contentedly.

“Time we got breakfast,” said Deborah; but she lay in his arms with one hand pressed against his side and the other thrust down between his neck and the collar of his shirt.

In the end it was Mrs. Bradley who got breakfast, and called them down to it. As soon as it was over, she got out the map, and, whilst Jonathan took the powerful cruiser slowly up-river, across Broads, down-stream, along staithe and cut, all the morning she worked with ruler, dividers, and pencil, charting distances and working out speeds and times.

It was just before lunch, when they had put in at Potter Heigham for cigarettes and petrol, that she had word of the third murder. Leaving Jonathan and Deborah to do the shopping, such as it was, she had gone to a public call-box and had rung up the inspector according to a previous arrangement. He was excited, in a gloomy sort of way, she gathered. Two boys, on a camping and boating holiday near Marsham Broad, had given information to the police, which had led to the discovery of a third body.

“I’ve been over there all morning, ma’am,” he concluded. “The doctor’s seen her—it’s another her, and seemingly the same type as the other two—and she’s been drowned. Ring the changes, don’t they? If you’d care to come over to my office this afternoon, you can talk to the lads for yourself. Aged fifteen they are, and camping out on an island on private property. You won’t find the island on the map. It’s a tiny place. Having the time of their lives, they were, until this business turned up. Doesn’t matter telling you all this on the ’phone, as the story will be in the papers tomorrow morning. We’re not keeping anything back except what kind these women are, and the little matter of the trademark, which was on this third woman just the same. It’s no secret we’re calling in the Yard. Had to. Besides, the Chief Constable’s getting nervous. Wants to park responsibility, I reckon. Shall I see you this afternoon, ma’am?”

“You certainly will,” Mrs. Bradley replied with zest. She rang off, and returned to the cruiser for lunch. Over tinned salmon, lettuces, bread and butter, bananas, chocolate, and beer, she recounted the news to the others, arranged with them to pick her up at Potter Heigham that evening, and they

cruised to Acle, where George had the car in readiness to take Mrs. Bradley to Norwich.

During the short cruise from Potter Heigham to Acle she had her map out again, made a special note of Marsham Broad, which was not far from Potter Heigham, and charted more distances and times.

The map now made an interesting little picture. The three bodies had been disposed as to make a triangle of deaths, and this triangle enclosed almost the whole of the courses of the River Thurne and Ant.

“May be nothing in it, of course,” said Jonathan, when she pointed out to him this fact.

“There would be something in it,” Mrs. Bradley retorted, “if, for their own purposes, the murderers are trying to shut off tourists from these rivers.”

“Tell me all when you return,” suggested Jonathan, shutting off the engine, and bringing *O'Reilly* gently in. “Hullo, there’s the car, and here’s George.”

Mrs. Bradley, taking her map, was soon in Norwich, and two lads, one tall, fair, and slight, the other dark and sturdy, rose from hard wooden chairs in the office, which the superintendent had placed at the disposal of Mr. Os, and responded shyly to the inspector’s introductions.

• CHAPTER 11 •

“Write that down,” the King said to the jury, and the jury eagerly wrote down all three dates on their slates, and then added them up and reduced the answer to shillings and pence.

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The island was a place of magic, and the risks run by reason of its being in possession of head-hunters in the form of ownership rights (for the small Broad was private property) added considerably to its charm. The boys had been there for a week. Every evening they planned next day’s meals (next day’s devilment resting on the knee of Fate) and every morning one or other of them kept watch in the sanctuary whilst the other sailed or rowed the dinghy to Heigham Bridge, moored near the bridge, and walked into Potter Heigham to do the necessary shopping, for they were healthy boys and ate well. Their names were Edward Benland and Ian Smith.

Theirs was a simple life, and, owing to the fact that neither Edward nor Ian had seen a newspaper, it remained for some days uncomplicated by the fact that two corpses had been discovered in suspicious circumstances not many miles from the island.

On the Saturday morning, which represented the end of a week’s holiday, it was Edward’s turn to do the shopping.

“And don’t forget,” said Ian, “that tomorrow’s Sunday, so mind you bring enough bread.”

Edward nodded. They made the usual careful reconnaissance, and then they quanted out the dinghy from a tiny backwater where she lay hidden. When she was out on the Broad and Edward had recounted his money, Ian waded ashore through muddy waters, and Edward set out for civilisation in the dinghy.

The Broad, which contained the island, was not marked on the map the boys had in their possession, but it lay to the south-west of Marsham

Broad, and was connected with the River Thurne by a short staithe, weedy, but with sufficient channel for the dinghy. Once the staithe reached the river it was easy going in the flat-bottomed little boat, for the way lay with the current. The boy left behind on the island expected to see his friend at about a quarter to nine, when he arrived with the “elevenses”—buns, chocolate, cardboard-packed ice-cream, ginger-beer, meat patties, and doughnuts.

The “elevenses” did not vary. Having decided, by a process of trial and error, which were the most desirable things to eat and drink in the middle of a summer morning, the boys sternly vindicated their choice by clinging to it with the fanaticism of lovers.

Ian, bereft of companionship, got his breakfast in a leisurely enjoyable manner, and settled down to bread, cold ham (purchased sliced and by the pound in Potter Heigham), more bread, marmalade, fig jam, and two cups of cocoa made from water boiled in the kettle over a spirit lamp and sweetened with condensed milk. The “elevenses” were a welcome supplement to this meagre pipe-opener, in the opinion of both the boys.

He washed up his plate and mug when he had done, by rinsing them in the Broad and rubbing the grease off the plate with grass. Then he emptied the kettle into a couple of clean jam-jars and set out for the farm. This business of getting the water was one of the most complicated manoeuvres of the day. First he put on his bathing trunks and a pair of rope-soled canvas shoes. Then, wading in, he swam across the Broad, pushing the kettle before him as one manipulates a water-polo ball, which is being dribbled towards the goal. When he emerged onto the bank, kettle in hand, he first of all took cover among the trees and squeezed all the water he could from his bathing trunks and his shoes. Then he picked up the kettle and trotted through the woods towards open country. There was a path, overgrown by trailing brambles, but usable, through the woods, but the boys always examined it carefully for marks of progress other than their own, for a person using it was on private property until he came out from among the trees, at the edge of the wood.

The woods were bounded by a simple wire fence. By the time Ian reached it his bathing trunks were no more than damp. He came cautiously into the open, skirted an arable field by its grassy verge, and then trotted again across a meadow to the farmyard. Here the boys had permission to draw water, so, filling his kettle, he returned by the way he had come, but travelled more slowly, for fear of spilling the water.

When he reached the shores of the Broad again, he placed the kettle on the ground and reconnoitred carefully. Then he picked up the kettle, waded into the water, and, floating gently upon his back, balanced the kettle on his stomach. He held it in position with both hands, and, kicking gently, propelled himself across the thirty yards of water which separated the mainland from the island. In the afternoon more water would be required, and Edward would go, but would be able to cross in the dinghy, fully dressed, for Ian, when both were together on the island, could bring the dinghy back to her hiding place in the creek, and go to ferry his friend across to the island upon his return from the farm.

Meanwhile, Edward, with the wind on the back of his neck to begin with, and never shifting further than on to his right cheek, made excellent time to Potter Heigham. It was in the provisions shop that he got his first account of the murders. Early though it was, there were six or seven yachtsmen and motorboat owners in the shop, and conversation was brisk and continuous. As it happened, no one else followed him in, so, when it came to his turn to be served, he said, rather diffidently, to the shopkeeper:

“Has there really been a murder round here? I haven’t seen the papers for a week.”

“Two murders,” said the shopkeeper. “Frighten people away from the Broads, that will. Not a doubt.” He proceeded to give some details whilst attending to Edward’s requirements. “I talk to a couple of policemen,” he concluded. “They think it do be wholly a poor lunatic, somebody with a boat. That flit from place to place, they say, and mark down some lonely female and then take the body and dump that in some lonely place. Have nobody on the Broads at all, if that go on much longer.”

“No, it’s not very nice for ladies and children,” Edward politely agreed. “Haven’t the police any clues?”

“That don’t seem so. There’s a reward this morning for anybody that give information.”

“I say! Where do you have to send the information if you get any?”

“Norwich.”

“Norwich Police Station.”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t meddle with murderers.”

“Not even for a reward? How much is it, do you know?”

“That don’t say how much.”

“Still, it would have to be a quid or two, wouldn’t it? I mean, you couldn’t call a few bob a reward, could you?”

“If that happen to be a hundred pounds, wholly in gold, that wouldn’t tempt *me*,” said the shopkeeper.

But Edward, returning to the dinghy with his load of provisions, was full of thought. This amazing news must be communicated to Ian and they must take a hand in the search for the murderer. The dinghy needed all his attention going back, but when he reached the island his mind was full again of the idea of getting the reward.

Voraciously the boys consumed their “elevenses,” and then, in the interval before it was time to prepare lunch, Edward repeated all that he had heard.

“But how do we begin?” enquired Ian, who had a practical but unimaginative mind.

“I bought a couple of papers in Potter Heigham, but haven’t had time to look at them yet. Perhaps they’ll give us a lead.”

There was nothing more in the papers, however, in the way of information, than Edward had already gathered from the conversation in the provision shop, and had already retailed to Ian.

“I’ll tell you what I think,” said Ian, when they had exchanged newspapers and felt that there was no more to be gained by their perusal. “I think we ought to work over the map today, plan the thing out, start at dawn tomorrow, and visit both places. I don’t suppose the police are still there. We might hit on a clue.”

Edward, after some thought, and a preliminary study of the map, agreed to this. They struck the tent that afternoon, packed up the rest of their provisions, the spirit lamp and the kettle, stowed away the mugs and plates (they used no cutlery except the knives which they carried strapped on to their belts), camouflaged a hideout for the gear, and, having scouted and reconnoitred, pushed off in the dinghy and made for Potter Heigham. They shot the bridge, and spent the afternoon, without the need to keep watch for the approach of enemies anxious to chase them away from private property, poring over the map, watching the inn at Thurne and charting a course for the morrow.

They had tea out that day, and, at just before sunset, were off the island again. They did not put up the tent, but spent the night amid

circumstances of the utmost discomfort in the dinghy, for they intended to be off as the night sky began to pale towards the dawn.

Edward, having slept fitfully during the early hours of darkness, woke at about one in the morning cramped and stiff. He altered his position, but, finding no possible solution to the discomfort, and envying Ian his stolid and still repose, got up and stepped carefully over the thwarts and over the stern to land.

A thick sweater, his blazer, a woollen scarf, a raincoat, and two pairs of socks had kept him reasonably warm, and his immediate thought was that a swim in the Broad might be worth while. He discarded his clothes, put on his raincoat over his naked body, put his shoes on to bare feet, and groped in his kit for a towel, which he knew was on top with his bathing trunks.

He found the towel, wrapped it round his neck, and groped his way between the trees to the clear edge of the water from which they were accustomed to bathe. Here he discovered that out in the open the night was so clear that it gave the effect of being luminous, although there was not a moon.

He put off his coat, placed the towel on top of it, and slid, with a delighted, involuntary shudder, into the still, cold water. The night was very quiet. He swam strongly and boldly towards the opposite shore. The water, of which his naked body seemed part, was delicious, and soon he was warm.

He reached the shore, turned, swam back and forth, and stayed in the water for about a quarter of an hour, as content, as pagan, as much a part of eternity and as distinct from time, as the night, the water, and the stars.

It was when he was within a yard or two of the island shore preparatory to landing that he heard the sound of muffled oars. His first thought was to secure himself against discovery. He turned, as quietly as an otter, away from the direction from which the sounds seemed to come, found depth of water in which to submerge, and swam under water to a great clump of reeds near the entrance to the creek where the dinghy lay at its moorings.

He had to guess the distance, for the water seemed black as ink, and just as he came up to breathe his fingers touched the stiff, outer fringe of the reed-bed. In another second, and with no more sound than a rustling, he was among the reeds, up to his knees in the soft ooze which formed the bed of

the creek and with his body submerged to the neck. There he waited and listened.

There was no doubt that, although the actual direction from which the sounds came was difficult to locate in the darkness, the people were approaching the island. He could hear voices coming distinctly across the water, although he could not distinguish what was said. The voices were those of two men.

Now that he had leisure for thought, two ideas were in Edward's mind. The first, and less comfortable, was that these were the murderers with yet another body. The second was that they were poachers. He dismissed the second thought almost immediately, reflecting that there was nothing to poach but fish—and fish were so easily obtained that to take them by night seemed stupid.

It was the killer at work again, then, decided Edward. But the thought of the reward came second, at that hour of the night, to the thought of their own danger. He waited no longer, but began to work his way round the clump of reeds to the mouth of the creek and to Ian, asleep aboard the dinghy. He pulled on shirt, sweater, and shorts, and found his tennis shoes. His walking shoes were still beside the water. Dressed, he woke Ian gently, intending him to make no noise. He bent to his ear and whispered:

“Something up. Come and see, will you?”

Ian groped for his shoes, put them on, and crawled out of the dinghy. The two boys crept snakily among the trees. The soft mud, still between Edward's toes, squelched clammily inside his shoes. The boys halted every few yards and listened intently, but nothing could be heard except the slight rustling noises of the night.

At last they reached the place where Edward had left his things. The boys lay flat on the bank and listened again. From away to their left, by the reed-bed in which Edward had lain hidden, came the sound of the voices again.

“Come on,” whispered Ian. He glided away towards the sound. Edward, unquestioning, followed him. Their progress became increasingly slow and cautious, for it was difficult to decide how far from them the owners of the voices had been. They were working back, round the shore of the Broad, towards the mouth of the creek, and the voices came ever nearer.

Edward thought of the unknown persons coming upon the dinghy, and so realising that the boys were on the island. But there came no sound to

indicate that the dinghy had been discovered. Instead, they themselves came upon a rowing-boat. Ian saw the dark shape first, and began to creep towards it. Hidden beside its bulk, the boys lay and wondered what to do with their prize. Ian, feeling for the rowlocks, found them padded. He groped for Edward's hand and so communicated to him this discovery. Then he swarmed over the thwarts and found the shipped oars. The blades were muffled in a substance that felt like velvet. He whispered in Edward's ear:

"Let's get back to camp. I'll bring the dinghy if you can help me shove her out of the creek. Then you bring this boat. We'll get them treed here."

This lawless plan made to Edward an immediate, irresistible appeal. They were almost on the edge of the creek. They lay and listened. The voices sounded more distant. They snaked in among the trees, listened again, and this time could hear nothing of the intruders. Quietly they pushed the dinghy towards the mouth of the creek. Her mast was stepped, her lug-sail folded away. Ian boarded her, quanted her into deep water, let her float onwards towards the middle of the Broad, then, judging it safe to do so, unshipped her short oars and rowed towards the staithe, which led to the river.

Edward returned to the rowing boat. Here the task of putting off was an easy one. He picked up his raincoat, towel, and shoes, thrust them thriftily on board, and then shoved off, clambered aboard, fitted the muffled oars to the muffled rowlocks, and rowed quietly into the staithe. Once clear of the Broad, and straining his eyes against the darkness of the reeds and the deceptive glimmer of the water, he managed to get the boat to the river entrance. Here, on the broader stream, it was easier going. In a minute or two he rested on his oars and cautiously hailed his friend.

From a short distance ahead the voice of Ian answered him.

"Can't go through Potter Heigham in the dark," called Ian. "Have to stay here for a bit. Should be light in another hour."

They made no attempt to draw into the bank for fear of damaging their craft, but floated, carried on slowly by the lazy current of the Thurne, keeping head to water by an adroit use of the oars. By the time dawn came they were about half a mile above the railway bridge. They pulled onward, shot both bridges, rail and road, and drew in by Thurne Mouth for breakfast. Here they left the rowing-boat.

After breakfast they hoisted sail, and a pleasant morning breeze carried them down to the inn by Wey Bridge for Acle. At Acle they went to

the police.

“Be a row about us being on the island,” said Edward, when a call had been put through to Norwich, and they had been told to wait, pending the inspector’s arrival.

“Not if we’ve treed the murderer and they find another body,” said Ian hopefully. “Besides, we’ve done no damage. We haven’t even lighted a fire.”

The sight of the boat with the muffled oars and rowlocks was sufficient to interest the inspector. He left it and the boys’ own craft in the care of the Acle police, and took the boys themselves, two constables, a doctor, and a sergeant in a fast motorboat from Acle up the Bure and the Thurne, and then, following the boys’ directions, once they had passed Potter Heigham, to the island.

The closest search of the island, however, revealed nothing but the body, which the boys were not allowed to see. The inspector, in fact, had been so much impressed by the sight of the captured boat that he had forbidden the boys to join in the search. They remained in the police launch in charge of the sergeant, whilst the inspector and his constables searched the island.

They did see the body brought on board, however.

A delicately worded insinuation by Ian that the reward would not be refused if offered caused the inspector to grunt, but he promised that, if anything came of their efforts, he would support their claim to the money. Not a word was said about damage or trespass. In fact, such a point did not cross the inspector’s mind.

• CHAPTER 12 •

“My notion was that you had been
(Before she had this fit)
An obstacle that came between
Him, and ourselves, and it.”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“And do you mean to tell me,” said Mrs. Bradley, when the boys had told their story and had been taken by a kindly police sergeant to his wife to get cakes and cider, “that two boys aged...”

“Fifteen.”

“That two boys aged fifteen came way from all that excitement on the island and tamely hung about until morning in order to inform the police of suspicious behaviour on the part of person or persons unknown?”

The inspector was disconcerted.

“I checked their story pretty carefully, ma’am.”

“I expect you did. Where are my students now?”

The inspector consulted a map.

“On Hickling Broad, ma’am. I thought you might like to go with these boys to the island.”

As soon as the boys came back, Mrs. Bradley invited them to come for a run in *O’Reilly*.

When lunch was over, she invited them to tell her their tale, putting in the bit she felt sure she had not been told in the inspector’s office.

“Well,” said Edward, glancing at Ian, “we didn’t tell the inspector quite all because we thought he might be annoyed at what we did. You see, well, I live at Acle, and Ian spends most of the summer holidays at our place because his people are in India and his guardian goes to Harrogate, and we know the Broads pretty well. So, you see, when I let the inspector

think that we sort of drifted down-river until it was light, that wasn't quite true."

"At least, it was true in itself, in a way," put in Ian; "but, of course, we did rather fill in a bit of the time in another way as well. In fact, we went back to the island."

"So I supposed," said Mrs. Bradley. "You were anxious to discover how our gentlemen of the muffled oars were taking the loss of their boat. But why not have told the inspector?"

"Well," said Edward, with another glance at his friend. He was a fair-skinned, delicate-looking boy, a strange and complete contrast to the almost swarthy Ian, who, shorter and sturdier, was undoubtedly the leader of the two, but who lacked, Mrs. Bradley supposed, the brains and imagination of Edward. "Well," said Edward again, "you see, when we got into the staithe, we didn't make straight way for the River Thurne. Instead, we took the two boats up a small channel—you'd probably never think you could get up it, even in daylight, if you didn't absolutely know it—and came ashore and worked round to the Broad again and lay on the bank and looked across at the island, and listened in."

"It was pretty ghoulish," said Ian, "and for about a quarter of an hour we didn't hear anything, and we began to wonder—at least, I did—whether, after all, we'd taken the boat of somebody quite innocent—eel fishers, or something of that sort—and just as we were getting fidgety with waiting, we heard the most frightful yell, and I said it must be the murderer getting to work."

"We felt pretty bad," added Edward, "wondering whether we could have done something to stop it, if we'd stuck it out on the island, but..."

"But I said the murderer would have done it, anyway, at some other time, even if we *had* been able to interfere..."

"And, after a bit, while we waited and nothing else happened, Ian suggested that we should oil across the Broad and stalk the chap."

"So we shed our clothes just where we were, and took bearings, as well as we could, to mark the place, and slid in and swam across, sort of dog-paddling, without any splash, and came up in the reed-bed, and listened, up to our necks..."

"Yes, and after about ten minutes, just as I was beginning to feel a bit cold, we heard a bloke singing. That was perfectly beastly..."

“Yes, because, of course, we were pretty sure we’d heard him do the murder, and he was singing sort of happily...”

“Not very loud, but it was as though he was fearfully bucked with himself over something...”

“And then he came along to get his boat, and, of course, it simply wasn’t...”

“Being safely parked in the cut at the side of the staithe. We’ll show you. And he stopped singing and started hunting for it, and then, when he couldn’t find it, he began swearing...”

“And that was pretty beastly too; so cold-blooded and sort of filthy—I don’t mean the words so much, because we knew most of those—but the way he got them out.”

“Yes, and he stamped about, looking for his beastly boat, but, of course, he couldn’t find it, and at last it seemed to dawn on him that he was treed all right, so he began to walk up and down and give kind of little cat-calls, as if he were signalling somebody—the other bloke, we supposed.”

“Yes, and then I had what I thought was an idea, and I sort of wailed, ‘Why don’t you swim for it, buddy?’”

“And the bloke seemed to have a sort of fit, and then he pulled himself together and yelled, ‘Where are you? Mousehold? Why the devil don’t you get me out of here? You know I can’t swim!’ Well, we weren’t saying any more, and after a bit he must have slipped into the woods, and we swam back across the water, and kept watch, when we’d found our clothes and shoved them on again...”

“My shirt stuck to me like glue. It’s beastly trying to shove clothes on in the dark and in a hurry, when you’re dripping wet...”

“And then we went back to the boats, and I’ll swear—in fact, we both can—that nobody crossed from the island until it was dawn. We thought we’d better clear off as soon as the sky got light, so we shoved off and got the boats back to the staithe and down to the river, and—and the rest was exactly like we told the inspector.”

Mrs. Bradley checked this ingenuous narrative by all the tests for truthfulness and accuracy, which she knew, but it stood all trials and withstood all temptations.

“I can’t see why you didn’t tell the inspector. What you did was most creditable,” she said, favouring the boys with her unnerving grin. “Do you mind if I tell him?”

“He’ll be pretty sore we didn’t tell him ourselves,” suggested Ian.

“No, I don’t think so. Now what about that yell you heard? A man’s voice or a woman’s?”

The boys looked at one another and shook their heads. The inspector later asked the same question, but the boys were uncertain, and refused to commit themselves.

“We’ve been over the rowing boat, ma’am, for fingerprints. Nothing, beyond those of the boys,” said the inspector. “We took theirs, of course, for reference. Whoever is running this racket isn’t giving much away. If it *is* your Mr. Bleriot, he isn’t giving us another chance to check up on those playing cards he handled during those tests you gave him at your house.”

“No. He knew the dodge, of course. But I had to employ it. It seemed absolutely necessary to get his fingerprints, thinking as I did about him.”

“Quite so, ma’am. Strange how you rumbled he was a wrong ’un.”

“Not strange at all, Inspector. And, of course, he may not have been a wrong ’un, but merely up to some game. And when you talk of running a racket, what am I to understand you to mean?”

“Mean, ma’am? I don’t know that I meant anything except the murders.”

“Well, racket, in the accepted sense of the business use of the word, is what it must all amount to.”

“But I thought—I was reckoning on a homicidal maniac, ma’am.”

“But, surely, Inspector, a homicidal maniac is not likely to have accomplices? He is that strange creature, an individualist, concentrating, with great ferocity, some intelligence, and single-mindedly, upon the murders which alone appear to give satisfaction to his ego and comfort to his soul.”

“Would you say a homicidal maniac has a soul, ma’am?”

“Have *you* a soul, Inspector?”

“It is open to doubt, I suppose, ma’am.”

“Then you are entitled to the benefit of that doubt. But, referring back for a moment, and speaking of the probability that these murders are not the work of a homicidal maniac but are part of a pre-arranged plan, have you not noticed that they have made a triangle cutting off the Ant and the Thurne? That seems to me of some importance, although, of course, it may be fortuitous.”

“My word! You’ve got something there, ma’am!”

“Just suppose, for the sake of argument, that it was in the interests of the murderers to keep a channel free of holidaymakers, at any rate at night. Then the places in which the bodies have been found would carry real significance, and might give us something to work on.”

“Sure would,” agreed the inspector warmly.

“It is possible that access to the sea may also be essential to their enterprise. There will be another murder, Inspector. I feel it in my bones.”

(The point that, if the anonymous threats were carried out, the fourth body might be her own, she forbore to mention.)

The inspector scratched his head, looked worried, and answered:

“It’s perfectly true about people clearing away at night from the places where the bodies have been found, ma’am. People want to see the spot where the body was found, but that’s by day. They don’t want their cruisers out in those places at night. One more body, as you say, would just about finish matters off, in the way of clearing a channel. But what’s the idea of it, ma’am? What sense does it make? This isn’t a smuggling district. They couldn’t bring enough in to warrant the risk they’re running. These murders are hanging matters. It isn’t just a matter of cheating the revenue, although that’s bad enough, as we know. Besides...”

“Besides, the waterway will not remain clear for long. You are right, Inspector, and that is why I may be utterly wrong. In any case, we ought to be prepared to act quickly.”

“I can police the Ant and the Thurne, ma’am, but not without the criminals spotting what I’m doing. And how to get our hooks on them if once they suspect we’ve got the right end of the stick, I confess I don’t altogether see.”

“Neither do I, at present,” Mrs. Bradley agreed. “By the way, was a worsted viper found on the third body?”

“It was, ma’am. A dirty murder, if ever there was one. You saw the body, ma’am. What did you make of it yourself? Beyond the fact, I mean, that she had been drowned.”

“I’ll tell you what I make of the yell the boys heard when they thought the murder was being committed.”

“Quite so, ma’am. The medical evidence showed that she must have been drowned some hours before they got her to the island. It couldn’t have been her that yelled out.”

“No. The yell was deliberately given to attract the boys’ attention to the spot. I’ve no doubt the police in London will find that this third woman again has come from their area.”

“She seemed the type, ma’am, as far as one can tell. But...” He shook his head, as one contemplating irritating but insoluble mysteries. “Are you still bent on keeping the vipers out of the Press, ma’am?”

“Emphatically,” Mrs. Bradley answered. “I only hope those houseboat people won’t talk.”

“They seem decent people, ma’am, and I warned them proper that if anything came out, it would only be them we could thank. They saw the point all right, and only the gentlemen saw the body, anyway.”

“And Mr. Whitstable sketched it,” said Mrs. Bradley. “By the way, is the New Cut navigable?”

“Yes, I think so, ma’am. At least, you used to be able to get nearly as far as Waxham, almost on the coast.”

“And what about the Hundred Stream? I see a lane comes down to that from the coast road without touching the village of Horsey.”

“Well, whether or not the Hundred Stream itself is navigable, you could still avoid the village, ma’am, by keeping to that same lane you mean and rounding the bend at Bramble Hill. See here, ma’am.” He pointed with a pencil to the map. “The lane runs along the course of the Hundred Stream and meets the road again to drop into West Somerton. There’s a staithe there gets you into Martham Broad, although the Broad’s choked up with weed. But no doubt these gentlemen would have a channel if they really wanted one. What *do* you suspect, ma’am? Can’t you give us something to work on?”

“The question still in my mind,” said Mrs. Bradley, “is what part does Amos Bleriot play in the affair? I still cannot decide, so far, whether he is an innocent or a guilty party. The presence of the vipers—a serpent is Satan’s sign—together with the drawing which Bleriot made in my consulting room and the sketch picked up in that questionable club with which the first two women, Sitter and Duke, appear to have had some connection, strongly indicate a Satanist society, as I think I suggested before.

“Now, Bleriot may know these people. He may be one of their number, or, of course, he may have given up their silly practices and is now

willing to do them some harm. We must not lose sight of the fact that he *may* be playing our game.

“It is true that in my consulting rooms he gave indication of homicidal tendencies but, all the same, it may well be that he wants to put us on the track of these people without their knowledge, and, knowing that my interpretation of his mind would compel me to warn the authorities against him, he chose this disappearing trick in order to cause the police to track him down, knowing that his tracks would inevitably cross those of the gang, of which, no doubt, he still pretends to be a member. Of course, this is all surmise, and, really, if you had seen him in my consulting room giving his very bad but, all the same, unmistakable impression of a monkey at the Zoo, you would have been as suspicious of him as I was. It was altogether too much of a caricature to carry conviction, I’m afraid, and I think there must have been method in such madness. After all, why should he want to pull my leg?”

She stretched out a desiccated limb and studied it thoughtfully.

“You mean,” said the superintendent, when Mr. Os had gone, “that this Amos Bleriot want to tip us the wink about something, ma’am? Then why not come out in the open, and tell us what he know?”

“He may not dare to do that. And I’ll tell you another thing, Superintendent, which I have not mentioned, so far, to Mr. Os for fear of spoiling his pleasure in the murders. This third body, like the first, would have seemed to me like a suicide except for the fact that it was carried to the boys’ little island in that extraordinary way, and the viper planted on it.”

“You think that about the first body, ma’am, I remember, and I have a talk with Doctor Callahan about it. That agree, so far, but, as you say yourself, dumping the body on the island, and the little snake, and that, do seem to point to murder. That wouldn’t be anyone’s idea of having a joke, ma’am, would it?”

“I don’t know, Superintendent. I have volumes of case-notes upon behaviour, which you would scarcely credit, even in your profession and with your knowledge of human nature. People whose minds have become diseased are apt to do very odd things, and it’s no use denying the fact. But Inspector Os has his theories, and it’s not my business to interfere with them, particularly as mine are fantastic. Have you ever heard of ‘hex-murders,’ Superintendent?”

“That would be an American idea, ma’am, I take it?”

“Yes. American black magic. It is perfectly easy, if you go the right way about it, to commit murder by persuading a person to commit suicide, you know. There are cases....”

She proceeded to recount one or two of them. The superintendent, undeniably interested, listened; but, at the end, shook his head.

“That couldn’t happen in Norfolk, ma’am. We’re all bred and born wholly more sensible than that.”

“Except Inspector Os,” said Mrs. Bradley, grinning.

“That Os, that do some good work last year, on some pretty big burglaries we have. That catch the Chief Constable’s eye. Very smart, that is,” said the superintendent loyally.

“By the way,” said Mrs. Bradley, “I neglected to ask Mr. Os whether Amos Bleriot’s fingerprints were found on that deck-chair we had from the people on *Calpurnia*. I imagine that they were not. In any case, I think, perhaps, that we should return the chair. As I was responsible for having it brought here, perhaps—?”

“Very good, ma’am. He was saying it ought to go back. No, there weren’t any prints that we wanted, so he say.”

• CHAPTER 13 •

“What fun!” said the Gryphon, half to itself, half to Alice.

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

It was August Bank Holiday. Mrs. Bradley had come and gone, leaving the glad tidings that the three girls were free from police surveillance and need no longer report their movements to the inspector. Already the lower reaches of the Thurne, on which lay the *Dithyramb*, were crowded with pleasure craft, and the air was full of the whirring, not of beetles' wings, but of gramophone records. Ginger-beer corks were beginning to pop and orange peel floated in little patches of iridescent oil on the placid and apparently uncaring water.

“Lor!” said Kitty. “Are we going to spend all day here?”

There was no reply from her confederates. Laura, looking bored, was reclining on the cabin top in a two-piece bathing suit, which, whilst aesthetically passable, for she had a splendid body and a good skin, was “apt to render the *embonpoint*,” as Kitty euphemistically expressed it.

“I do *wish* you'd put some slacks or shorts on or something,” said Alice. “You're attracting attention.”

“Not in this noodist colony, I ain't, duck,” retorted Laura; but she spoke dispiritedly.

“Personally,” went on Alice, leaning over the side and methodically fishing up orange peel in a small net, “I'm so thankful that Mrs. Bradley has persuaded the inspector that we're not criminals, that I don't care what we do. It will be nice to laze about and explore, and see some old churches and things, and go where we like without the police having to know.”

“Mrs. Croc. is an old duck,” said Laura, “getting the inspector off our necks. What are you going to do with that beastly peel?” she added, aware, for the first time, of Alice's salvage operations.

“Put it all in a paper bag and bury it when we go ashore,” replied the scavenger, proceeding to put the first phase of this exemplary behaviour into practice.

“Go ashore?” said Laura thoughtfully. “And not such a bad idea, at that. If we’ve got to endure a Bank Holiday, let us endure it nobly. Who votes for a day at Yarmouth?”

“Too much fag to get there,” objected Kitty.

“You’d have to dress,” said Alice.

“Not until we get within sight of the town, I shouldn’t.”

“Anyhow, you’ll have to put something more on if you’re going to sit in that cockpit. You know how breezy it is. You’ll only go and catch cold.”

“Meaning you don’t want to go,” said Laura, retaining her sprawling attitude and poking in a box of chocolates. “All right. I’ll get dressed and go by myself. The main road from Acle runs straight into Yarmouth. It’s only about eight or nine miles. I can do it in a couple of hours, unless I can hitch-hike a lift.”

“Everybody’s car will be bung-full on a Bank Holiday,” said Kitty. “I haven’t forgotten how we tried to hitch-hike home the last time, when we lost our return tickets, and you said we’d be sure to get a lift.”

“That wasn’t my fault, duck. The tickets were in your keeping. I didn’t ask you to haul ’em out with your handkerchief and cast ’em to the winds, did I?”

“But it was your fault I had to get my handkerchief out at all, just then, right on the front. It was you that *would* put all that pepper on those horrible whelks.”

“Only way to eat ’em, duck. Ever had whelks, young Alice?”

“Don’t change the subject,” said Kitty. “Are you really going to Yarmouth?”

“Yep,” said Laura, getting up. “Here and now.” The others looked at one another as she disappeared into the cabin.

“If we went all the way by water,” said Alice, “it would take a good time, wouldn’t it?”

“And we’d have to leave pretty early to make sure of our moorings before dark,” contributed Kitty. “Yes, we’d better go with her. There’s no knowing what she’ll get up to if we let her go off on her own.”

“Especially as she’s a bit fed up at having Mrs. Bradley warn us to keep out of the murders. For my part, I’m only too thankful to be told to get

out of the way, but Laura is frightfully disappointed.”

“Come on, then. Let’s tell her before she gets changed, or else she’ll be annoyed about that.”

They bellowed the news to Laura through the cabin window, but stipulated that the journey was to be made by water, as they were not going to walk eight or nine miles out and the same distance back in the evening. If they were going to run the cruiser down to Acle they might as well run her all the way, they added.

“Slackers,” said Laura, appearing with her magnificent posterior draped, this time, in a pair of linen shorts. “All right, then. But I shan’t waste time on the way.”

“That’s as may be,” said Kitty, eyeing the crowded river. The Thurne, past Thurne Mouth, took them on to the Bure, and on that river their progress, although not rapid, was reasonably continuous. At just after one o’clock Laura moored the cruiser along the East Side quay, and the party went ashore for the day.

Fish, chips, and beer formed the staple food at lunch, and by four in the afternoon Laura announced that she had “had enough of the seaside,” and would have another swim and her tea, and then make a move towards the cruiser. The others agreed, and the first part of this programme was carried out. However, all the teashops were crowded, so, after three-quarters of an hour passed fruitlessly in the quest of an establishment which offered “even a moderate chance of a table,” as Kitty put it, they decided to cruise back to Acle and try to get tea there.

“If not tea,” said Laura, “we might be able to get beer and a snack at one of the riverside inns.”

This suggestion was not received well by Kitty, who protested that she was “simply dying for a nice cup of tea,” but the protest, although sympathetically received by Alice, made no impression on Laura, who led the way sternly back to the cruiser and, with some difficulty, for the quay-side was crowded with moored craft, put off northwards for the bend of the river at Marsh Farm.

“Farm?” said Kitty, pricking up her ears at the word. “No good trying one right on the river. I expect they’ve been badgered all day. But what about mooring somewhere or other, and taking a walk inland a bit, Dog? I’d willingly walk a mile for a nice cup of tea.”

“You and you tea!” said Laura.

“I think you’ll be wasting your strength,” observed Alice; “but just as you like. We’ve got plenty of time. Have a look at the map, and see what’s what.”

Just above Six Mile House Laura put in to the side. A lane, going northwards, seemed to promise as well as anything else they could find, and, leaving Laura on board, as she said she could not be bothered to accompany them, Kitty and Alice set off across the marshes. Laura got out some biscuits and a bottle of lemonade, and settled down philosophically to await their return.

At the end of two and a half hours, however, she felt a good deal less philosophical. The sun was declining, and an evening breeze whipped the river into little eddies and caused Laura to go into the cabin and change her clothes for something warmer. Dressed in slacks, sweater, and a blazer, she resumed her vigil. Another half-hour went by, and still the others did not come. It was not Laura’s nature to be anxious, but she did become somewhat irritable.

“Selfish blighters,” she grumbled to herself.

Mist began to rise from the river. They could moor where they pleased now, she reflected, grateful again to Mrs. Bradley for having relieved them of police surveillance. That was one good thing. There was no need to worry about getting to any particular spot by nightfall. They were, for the first night in a week, free agents as far as a choice of moorings was concerned. But the darkening landscape began to depress her. Boats of all kinds passed the *Dithyramb* during the time that Laura had been alone, all of them homeward bound at the end of the long, hot day. She thought she might as well have an evening dip, and was about to descend to the cabin when she saw a figure running towards her across the marshes—or, rather, along the causeway.

Even at a considerable distance she recognised the runner to be Kitty. She leapt ashore and went to meet her. Kitty was breathless and excited.

“Can you come, Dog?” she demanded, as soon as she could speak. “Alice is trailing the man. We want to know what to do.”

“What man, duck? Not the murderer?”

“That’s what we don’t know,” said Kitty, dropping into a walk. “I’ve come to bring you and the coshes.”

“Good idea,” said Laura, brightening. “Get your breath, while I run back for them.”

Kitty was still breathing fast when she returned. She observed that they would have to walk for a bit, as Alice was in no danger, and she herself could not “raise a run” to save her life.

“Shoot, K.,” said Laura. “What’s been happening? I thought you’d lost yourselves, or something.”

“Well, we found a farm,” said Kitty. “In fact, we found two, because they said they’d got scarlet fever at the first one, and, although they were ever so hospitable, we thought we’d better not go in. Well, we went on and came to a second farm. It was about two miles off, across the marshes, and we had to keep jumping little ditches, because Alice saw a short cut, and, when we got there, there was a beastly dog neither of us liked the look of. It was roaming loose, and barked and growled like anything, and I think it might have gone for us, only we kept one side of the last ditch and the dog didn’t seem to want to jump across.

“Well, of course, the farm got further and further away, and there seemed no chance of tea, and the beastly dog still barked, and still kept up sides with us along the beastly ditch, and then Alice said she thought perhaps the people might all have gone out for the day, as it happened to be Bank Holiday, and she wondered whether it wouldn’t be just as well to get back to the boat and hope for the best from a pub.”

“Far more sensible,” said Laura.

“Yes, well, we were just going to call it a day and get back when we saw a man, and it turned out to be the farmer, and he called the dog to heel and I suppose he asked us what we wanted, but his local accent was so thick I couldn’t make out a word, and neither could Alice. Anyway, we said we wanted tea, and he took us back to the farm, and I must say they did us jolly well, and, what’s more, wouldn’t take any money.

“Well, after three cups of strongish brew and a lot of grub, and stuff, we said goodbye and thanked them and started back, and that was when we saw this man.”

“Go on,” said Laura, as the narrator paused.

“Yes, well, it was Alice who spotted the snake.”

“Spotted the what?”

“You know, like the one on the dead woman at the bungalow that you thought must be the weapon when you first felt to see if her heart was beating.”

“What, another of those vipers made of worsted? The things Mrs. Bradley asked us not to breathe a word about?”

“Well, look: what do *you* think?”

She glanced round the flat and empty landscape, but there was not so much as a solitary bush for miles. Satisfied, she reached to the top of her stocking and untied the worsted viper, which she had been wearing, apparently, as a garter.

“Golly, K.,” said Laura, enormously impressed. “Tell me more. How come young Alice spotted it?”

“Well, this man was some sort of hawker or peddler or something, and we met him along the causeway the farmer showed us (so that we didn’t have to keep jumping ditches getting back to the river) and he had this little tray thing slung round his neck, and also a suitcase, like when they go from house to house in towns.

“Well, he put the wind up us, rather, because some of them aren’t very nice, and although we hadn’t a lot of money, we did have some, and Alice said, ‘If he starts anything I’m going to bowl him out. If I flatten him, jump on his stomach.’

“Well, I wasn’t too keen. Dog, but you know what young Alice is—all India-rubber and muscle, although she’s so thin and sort of small—so I said I’d do what I could, although goodness knows it isn’t in my line, jumping on people’s stomachs and all that sort of thing, I’d be too afraid I might hurt them.

“Anyway, this man did stop us, and a ferrety-looking customer, too, and we said we didn’t want to buy anything when young Alice suddenly said, picking out the viper from a lot of beads and lace collars and woollen tennis socks and combs and things on the tray, ‘What’s the price of this?’

“‘Oh, that’s not for sale,’ said the bloke. ‘That’s only my trademark, lady, as I call it.’

“Well, you’ve got to give Alice credit for quick action. She had snatched the viper from the man and off like a shot before I had time to say a word. The man sort of gawped after her, and I felt more than a bit of a fool, and said, ‘What do you value it at?’—thinking that might soothe him or something.

“Well, instead of answering, he put down the suitcase and tray, and went haring after old Alice like mad. Of course, I could have told him it wasn’t any good, and I did when he came back for his suitcase and tray.”

“You don’t mean to say you stood guard over them all the time he chased Alice?” said Laura, tickled.

“Well,” said Kitty apologetically, “I can quite see it must seem batsy, looked at the way one would look at it if one hadn’t actually been there, but at the time I didn’t really like to go off and leave the things, as Alice had snatched the viper, but as soon as he came back towards me, I ran away, only shouting to him that I’d put a shilling on the tray for the ornament—that’s what I called it, Dog, not to give any games away—and told him that I knew it wouldn’t be any good him chasing Alice because, as you know, Dog, she can make rings round anything except, possibly, a Derby winner, and I wouldn’t even take much of a bet upon that.”

“So what happened then?” enquired Laura, following this extraordinary narrative with such close attention that she nearly fell into a brook.

“Well, the man went on towards the farm and young Alice made a sort of semi-circle and came up with me from the back, having covered, she reckoned, about four miles across country.”

“But that must have taken her an hour.”

“Forty minutes, Dog. She’d run a good bit of it, you see, and done a lot of it at Scout’s Pace, whatever that is. Anyway, she didn’t seem puffed or particularly fagged or anything, and all she said was, ‘Where’s he gone?’

“Well, of course, I told her he was making tracks for the farm, and she said we must follow him up to see what he’d got to say about the viper, and I said all he’d have to say about the viper was that she’d pinched it off his tray, and she said yes, she’d thought of that, but it couldn’t be helped. So I told her I’d left a shilling, and she said, ‘Well, there you are, then.’ But we’re not, you know, Dog,” concluded Kitty earnestly, “because, you can say what you like, but the chap wanted his viper back; he didn’t want the money.”

“So what?” demanded Laura. “Go on. There must be more to it than that.”

“Well, I’m telling you as fast as I can. We got back to the farm at about seven, and this time the dog was shut up. At least, we didn’t see it. But other dogs started to bark, and we had to go to ground behind a couple of rainwater butts, upwind so the dogs couldn’t smell us. That was young Alice’s idea.”

"I bet it was. There's something in this Girl Guiding, after all, besides tying knots in pieces of string, and lighting a fire by rubbing a stick against your eyebrows, or whatever it is they do," said Laura, nodding her head.

"Well, we waited about an hour. It was sort of boggy and the smell wasn't all that good, but at least we had our reward, because out came the chap with suitcase and tray complete, and set off in the opposite direction."

"So he passed the farm coming along, but called there after he met you two and had the viper stolen," said Laura thoughtfully. "So you left Alice trailing the bloke, and came to fetch me and the coshes."

"That's right, Dog. Of course, we lost a lot of time. Then we had to let him get on a good bit before we began to follow him. And when we'd gone about a mile, and it was beginning to get most frightfully misty over the marshes, Alice said she'd follow him better alone, and that she'd leave signs for us to follow, and I was to come here as quickly as ever I could, and get you. The coshes were my own idea."

"And a ripe one," agreed Laura. "Well, we can make all speed to the farm and a mile or so beyond, I take it, and then we must keep a look-out for Alice's signs. And I hope they're readable at dusk, which is just about upon us, I fancy."

She was right. The mist over the marshes had thickened, but was only about breast-height. Above, the sky was darkly blue and one star had already made an uncalled-for, presumptuous appearance.

The dogs, it appeared, did not hear them—a fact which filled Laura with a suspicion, which she did not voice to Kitty. All she said was, when the farm buildings were half a mile behind them:

"Did you happen to tell the farm-people the name of the boat?"

"We didn't say we were off a boat," replied Kitty. "We agreed that, as we'd left you alone on it, and allowing for the murders, you know, we wouldn't say anything at all about boats, but just say we were out walking and had been looking for somewhere for tea, and that the marshes seemed lonelier than we'd thought."

"Good for you. I see the brain of young Alice in all this kindness and discretion."

"Well, I don't know so much about that, Dog," said Kitty, wounded. "If you really want to know, *I* was the one who said you shouldn't be murdered if I could do anything to prevent it."

“Many thanks. And now, how much farther to where the two of you parted?”

“Not far now. There’s a kind of little bridge that carries this causeway over a biggish brook.”

Laura held her wristwatch close to her eyes.

“If the chap moved fast, young Alice may be five miles ahead,” she observed. “No idea what time you left her, I suppose?”

“Yes. It was ten to eight by her watch.”

“And that was slow, I think. We argued about it this morning. It’s now, so far as I know, about five to nine. The chap can’t get much farther tonight, even knowing the marshes, and, unless he’s discovered that Alice is on his trail, he won’t bother anyway. I hope she hasn’t given her presence away. It might be awkward.”

“I oughtn’t to have left her,” said Kitty, “but she seemed positive she’d be all right, and we had to let you know, somehow, what was happening, unless we’d just given up and both come back to the boat, and having got hold of a jolly good clue like the viper, we didn’t feel inclined to do that.”

“And what’s the plan of action when we *do* catch up with young Alice?” demanded Laura.

“We rather left that to you, Dog. We’re game to take on anything you suggest.”

“The right spirit,” said Laura cordially. “Peer through the gloom, love, and, while not definitely pointing me to the skies, tell me what you make of yonder mass which appears to me to loom some fifty yards ahead.”

“Looks like a house,” said Kitty. “In fact, I remember now. It is a house. Funny to be stuck right out here on its own.”

“Well said. And here’s another brook and the causeway crossing it. Wonder whether young Alice has by any possibility left a clue underneath the little bridge thus formed?”

“I’m here myself,” said Alice, crawling out and almost startling her friends “into hydrophobia,” as Laura expressed it later. “I didn’t bother to leave any signs, because you couldn’t possibly have taken any road but this one from the other bridge where I left Kitty. The man went into that house. I’ve been up a lot closer to reconnoitre, but there’s nothing doing yet, not even a light to be seen. I went all round. There aren’t any dogs.”

“What do we do, then?” asked Laura. “The blighter is probably spending the night in the house.”

“Yes I know. It’s very awkward. I think we ought to keep together, even if we have to spend the night underneath this bridge. It’s drier than you would think.”

“It would need to be,” said Laura, “but I agree. And what then? Suppose he’s here for a week?”

“That’s hardly likely if he’s really a peddler. Trouble is, I don’t suppose he’s anything of the kind, and what I’m afraid of is that he may not be alone when we see him or hear him come out.”

“And suppose he *is* alone?” demanded Kitty.

“Bag him, and haul him back to the cruiser, and tie him up, and telephone the inspector at Norwich in the morning.”

“Glory hallelujah, young Alice! Fancy an Infant Samuel like you turning Thug in your old age!”

“It’s in a good cause,” said Alice seriously.

“And supposing he’s *not* alone?”

“I suppose we trail them, but it isn’t easy on absolutely flat and open marshland like this. I shouldn’t have been able to manage it this evening but for the mist, and the dark coming on when it did.”

“And, of course,” said Laura, serious in her turn, “he *may* have thought pinching his viper was all done in girlish fun, but if he suspects we *know* anything—”

“Oh, don’t, Dog! You give me the horrors! I don’t want my throat cut,” protested Kitty.

“Don’t worry, duck. You wouldn’t know much about it,” retorted Laura. “I vote we take turns on watch, and the other two take cover under the bridge.”

There was an hour and a half to wait. The mist cleared, night fell, and the loneliness of the marshes, in spite of the proximity of the farm, was almost overpoweringly unpleasant. The new moon rose and cast a bluish light over the landscape and picked out the waters on the marshes and reflected in them the reeds that grew on the edge. The whitewashed house stood out like a building in a nightmare.

“Next year I’m going to Brighton with my mother,” said Kitty firmly. As she spoke the door of the farmhouse opened and an orange glow appeared, against which were silhouetted two men. One made a gesture of hitching something up onto his shoulder, and then picked up what might have been a suitcase. He came towards the hiding-place of the students.

Alice was on watch. She hissed the news to the others, and wriggled into cover. The man called back a goodnight to the man who still stood in the doorway. Kitty was clasping Laura's left hand in a nervous grip. The peddler crossed the little bridge. Alice wriggled out after him, but not until the man at the house closed the door.

The peddler seemed uneasy. He made good going towards the river, but continually stopped and seemed to listen. Alice, in the lead, gave the signal each time for the halt. The moon allowed the girls to walk safely almost on the edge of the causeway, so that it was possible to drop face downwards into the ditches which drained the causeway on either side if the man looked round. But he seemed to fear no attack from the rear, and the tactics adopted by the girls of walking on the rough grass instead of the causeway itself, and of stopping dead whenever the man stopped, were completely successful.

Alice retained the lead, her cosh held lightly in her hand. Kitty clutched hers in a vice-like grip and Laura twiddled hers occasionally and seemed anxious for action. Gradually they began to close up on the man. Suddenly Alice, without turning her head, beckoned Laura onward. They had passed the farm at which the two girls had been entertained, and had left it three-quarters of a mile behind. Suddenly the man left the causeway and began to make his way across the marshes.

"Now," said Alice. The sound of her voice, which came loud upon the night, caused the man to stop dead.

"Don't take any chances," said Laura. "I'm going to land him one for luck."

Leaping forward, she swung her cosh with the true aim and unthinking blood-thirstiness of her position as centre-half in the College hockey eleven. The man fell flat.

"Oh, dear!" said Kitty, dropping her cosh and falling on her knees beside him. "Oh, Dog, you needn't have hit so hard. You may have killed him!"

"Rot," said Laura. "And now to get him to the boat. Lucky he's not a heavyweight. And that tray and suitcase will have to be brought along, too. See if you can lug them, K., while Alice and I convey the corpse."

The man, although no taller than Laura and apparently slimly built, posed a difficult problem in transport, but by the time they had staggered a

couple of hundred yards he began to recover consciousness. They were made aware of this by hearing him give a loud groan.

“Put him down,” said the sweating Laura, who had taken his shoulders, “and let’s hobble him a bit. He’ll have to walk the rest. Got anything we can tie him up with?”

Alice had a belt to her cotton frock. It was of double material, and strong. With it they bound their victim’s wrists. Kitty was wearing stockings, and these, tied together, made an efficient “hobble,” so that, set on his feet and threatened by the Amazons, the man was able to stumble towards the cruiser “under his own power,” as Laura expressed it. He tried the trick of falling down and affecting to be unable to get up, but Laura prodded him so sharply in the ribs with a toe of an efficient shoe that he found he could “make it, after all,” as Kitty said. It was necessary to free his ankles completely, to enable him to board the cruiser, but Laura stood by with her cosh and told Kitty and Alice to get the baggage on board and bring an electric torch.

The girls took it in turns to guard the captive all night, and Kitty, with a written message, went ashore next morning at Acle to telephone Mrs. Bradley, for it had been decided to “pass the buck,” as Laura put it.

She returned disconsolate and somewhat alarmed.

“She doesn’t seem terribly pleased with us, Dog,” she observed. Laura was not surprised.

“Assault and battery, duck. We weren’t attacked,” she observed philosophically. “And people who *really* do their duty by the State are often persecuted, martyred, and what-not. It’s a kind of natural law.”

“But I don’t want to be persecuted and martyred, Dog! And I did say you’d hit him too hard.”

“That don’t matter. Hitting him at all is the point at issue.” She grinned at the prisoner, who scowled. Seen by daylight, he was a brown-faced gipsy with monkey-like eyes and thin, small hands.

“Well, anyway,” said Kitty. “I’m glad the police know.” She looked kindly and dispassionately upon their prisoner, whom Alice was feeding with pieces of bread, butter, and marmalade proffered upon a teaspoon, as his hands were still fastened. “I was positive I was going to be murdered last night on those beastly marshes.”

The prisoner voiced a blasphemous negation of this, which Alice cut short with a thrust of bread and marmalade, but Laura brightened.

“Come aloft,” she said. Kitty began to protest, for she dreaded those inspirations with which Laura was frequently visited. “Now, then, are you prepared to maintain that in front of witnesses?” demanded Laura, dragging her on to the deck.

“Maintain what, Dog?”

“That you thought we were going to be murdered?”

“I said *me*, not *us*.”

“Well, qualify it. ‘Us’ is absolutely necessary.”

“Just as you say then. But aren’t you and Alice witnesses?”

“No. Interested persons,” said Laura, breaking up a piece of chocolate with which to regale the captive.

• CHAPTER 14 •

“Serpent!” screamed the pigeon.

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Mrs. Bradley, accompanied by the inspector, descended upon the *Dithyramb* at Acle just before eleven in the morning.

“Dear, dear!” she said, looking at the prisoner and then at Laura.

“Dear, dear, dear, dear, dear!”

“We did it for the best,” said Alice, immediately upon the defensive, as became the virtuous detected in sin. Mrs. Bradley clicked her tongue. The inspector, assisted by the sergeant and a constable, removed the prisoner to a waiting car, and took charge of the viper, which was handed over, at his behest, by Kitty, after Mrs. Bradley had asked permission to examine it.

“And now,” said Mrs. Bradley, “please explain yourselves.”

“Can’t say any more than we did in front of the inspector just now,” said Kitty. “I was frightened to death,” she added, loyally, catching Laura’s threatening eye. “I was certain we were all going to be murdered on those marshes.”

“That is the only excuse I could make to the inspector on your behalf,” said Mrs. Bradley, with a chuckle. “Fortunately he is prepared to accept it. But, my dear children...!”

“Do you mean we shan’t be proceeded against?” asked Alice, relaxing.

“The inspector’s jolly bucked with that serpent, I should say,” observed Kitty, when Mrs. Bradley had gone. “And he must want that man, or they wouldn’t have taken him off in the Black Maria.”

“I thought Mrs. Bradley wanted us to keep out of the case,” said Alice. “And, anyway, I don’t much like the inspector. Doesn’t she want us to keep out?”

“Too much to expect,” said Laura. “The fever is in our blood. The yeast is working. The little leaven has leavened the whole lump. The West’s

awake. We're out to seek an age of gold, beyond the Spanish Main."

"An ounce of lead is more like it," said Kitty, with unexpected felicity. "And, personally, Dog, I'm through. I wouldn't take part again in anything like last night for ages and ages of gold, or oceans and oceans of Spanish Main."

"Sez you! What do you say, young Alice?" demanded Laura.

"Well, if Mrs. Bradley really doesn't want us interfering...", persisted Alice. "And that's practically what it amounted to, I thought."

"All right," said Laura. "I hunt alone. You, young Alice, can handle the cruiser as well as I can, now. You two can go off and finish the week, but I, tongue out and uttering loud panting noises indicative of hound-like zeal, shall remorselessly hit the trail. The police and Mrs. Borgia shall be assisted in spite of themselves."

Kitty grinned. "Valuable as your assistance would undoubtedly be, my dear Laura," she said, with a recognizable attempt at Mrs. Bradley's manner, "and greatly as I should enjoy your company, I cannot burden myself with the responsibility of your safety. I am not thinking of you personally, but of your parents. This is not a game we are playing, and you have played the goat long enough," she concluded, in her normal voice.

"Hear, hear!" said Alice. "She's quite right, Dog."

"I like that!" said Laura. "Who pinched the serpent in the first place? Look here, if I can get the money from home, will you both go on with it, and stay on the Broads another week?"

"That's a safe promise. You will never get either money or permission from home," said Kitty decidedly. "Besides, you heard what Mrs. Croc. said, as well as we did. She doesn't want us messing round. She thinks we may have queered the pitch as it is."

"Never knew the old serpent so sticky," grumbled Laura, compelled to acquiesce in this opinion. She began to compose telegrams upon the back of an envelope.

"How do you think this sounds?"

"You might just as well save your money. You know quite well your people won't let you hunt murderers," interjected Alice, before Laura could recite her compositions.

"Don't babble. Listen! *Offer to assist Mrs. Bradley detection any objection Laura.*"

“You won’t get away with that. Of course they’ll object. Who wouldn’t? You may be a pest in the home circle, but I don’t suppose they want you murdered.”

“All right. What about this one? *Opportunity gain experience police work and procedure advise Laura.*”

“Don’t be so silly! Why do *you* want to know about police work and procedure?”

“You’re not very encouraging, I must say. How about this? *May I stay up here another week important Laura.*”

“Well, that’s honest, anyway,” said Alice.

“But they’re sure not to let you,” said Kitty, giving once again her considered view.

“Oh, they don’t care all that much what I do,” protested Laura; but she seemed disinclined to put her telegrams to the test, and in the end crumpled up the envelope and tossed it in the river. “Let’s go to that farm again and ask if they’ll give us tea,” was her next suggestion.

“The police will be over there,” said Alice. “I think we’d better lie low, after hitting that man on the head and keeping him prisoner all night. It’s a free country, whatever you may say, and you can’t be allowed to do that sort of thing. We’re lucky to have scaped out of it, I consider. Why don’t we do what Mrs. Bradley says, and just get on with our holiday? Here it is Tuesday, and we’ve only got until Saturday midday. Personally, I’d like to see the Broads while I’m about it.”

“Yes, come on, Dog,” said Kitty in her motherly, coaxing way. “You know you wanted to take us on to the River Yare and on to Reedham and Lodden. Let’s start that today. We can have lunch out of the tinned stuff, and I’ll go into the town and get some more beer while you and Alice have a swim.”

“All right,” said Laura, throwing off her moodiness and returning to her usual state of energetic cheerfulness. “Come on, young Alice. Off with the lendings. Better make it a crate, K., then the boy can cycle down with it.”

“O.K., Dog,” said Kitty, with sunny alacrity. The other two watched her out of sight along the pleasant riverside bank, and then started up the cruiser in quest of a suitable bathing-place.

There were noticeably fewer craft upon the river, and a spot at once secluded, free from weed and deep enough for swimming was not very

difficult to find. They swam and played about in the water for twenty minutes, dried themselves in the cabin, were dressed, and had brought the cruiser back to her previous moorings within the space of an hour from Kitty's departure.

But at lunch, Laura returned to the subject nearest her heart.

"Alice can handle the cruiser as well as I can. Let's go to the place where you two went ashore yesterday evening, and I will visit those farms before the police get round to them. The people haven't set eyes on me yet. They only saw you two. I shall ask them for a drink of water, or directions for finding my way, and spy out the lie of the land."

"You can't go alone," said Kitty, "and if one of us came with you we'd be recognised."

"That's what I'm pointing out, ass." She argued her point until, with many misgivings, Kitty and Alice agreed to keep the cruiser in motion up and down the river between Stokesby Old Windmill and Maltby Marsh Farm and pick up Laura as time and place should indicate.

"After that," said Laura, "if nothing comes of it, I'll go to Reedham and Ludham and Lowestoft and Beccles and Bungay, if you like."

The farmhouse at which Kitty and Alice had received hospitality proved to be well tenanted. Besides the girl of about sixteen who opened the door there were two women—the farmer's wife and her sister—and no fewer than seven young children, whose ages ranged from ten to ten months. Five were the farmer's own, the other two were his wife's sister's children. All this was explained in friendly conversation over enormous glasses of cider, for, said the farmer's wife, living as they did on the marshes, it was a real treat to have somebody to talk to.

Laura introduced the subject of the peddler.

"Ah, him. That live over by Stalham way. Come round these parts now and again, that do, with his little bits. Bring gossip."

"What does he sell? I saw him yesterday, and didn't like the look of him much."

"That do be harmless. That bring a few ribbons and lace and 'lastic, some combs and toothpaste—just what all of 'em have. That wouldn't hurt a fly. Well known, that is, about the place."

"Oh, that's all right then," said Laura. "I nearly stopped him to ask if he had any children's toys. I've got a little niece who collects toy animals—frogs and those wooden snakes that waggle, and monkeys and things."

“That don’t deal in toys, not so far as I know. Little gimcracks, mostly —brooches, sometimes, and beads.”

Laura stayed an hour and a half, but got no more. She wondered when the police would visit the marshes. They were bound to come to the farmhouses to question the occupants, unless they had got out of the prisoner what they wanted to know. Of course, he might have an explanation that would satisfy them about the worsted snake, but they would push him hard, she imagined, as a similar symbol had been found on all three corpses.

She walked on towards the house. Seen by daylight, it looked innocent enough, except that its remote situation, and the absence of any road to it except the narrow causeway along which she was walking, gave it romantic interest of a kind.

“Same tactics again, I take it,” she said to herself, as she crossed the tiny bridge under which the girls had sheltered and from which they had stalked their prey. “Up to the door and ask whether I’m right for the main road. I know I am, but what’s the odds.”

She carried out this programme, and the door was opened by an old woman who seemed to be deaf and almost blind. The shouting match, carried on with growing discomfort and embarrassment by Laura, was interrupted by the appearance of a middle-aged man in grey flannel trousers, carpet slippers and a velvet coat, who produced from the angle which the passage made with the front door a megaphone. Placing the narrow end to his lips and the mouth against the side of the old woman’s head, he said:

“All right, Mrs. Braintree.”

At this the crone nodded and went along the passage to a door which, when opened, emitted a strong smell of fried onions.

“And now, what can I do for you? Will you come in?” said the householder. “Do you like fried onions? And what’s your opinion of hot silverside of beef? Do you prefer herrings or tomatoes? And what is today’s news?”

He had Laura by the sleeve, and was drawing her affectionately into the house. Laura, not altogether easy in her mind at this extraordinary reception, was nevertheless strangely inspired and enlightened. She felt sure that she had stumbled upon Mrs. Bradley’s lunatic, the gifted and abnormal Amos Bleriot.

Unable to decide what to do next, she sat in fevered impatience whilst, in a pleasant room lined with books and furnished with every evidence of the taste of an educated man of artistic inclination, Amos Bleriot (if it were he) discussed motor-racing, cricket, mountaineering, and small-boat sailing. There was no repetition of the inane questions with which Laura's arrival had been greeted. The talk was mildly interesting, but her brain was concerned only with the problem of departure, for which her host offered no opportunity whatever.

At the end of an hour and forty minutes she contrived to say that she thought she should be going. The host was minded otherwise. She must certainly stay to lunch. There was plenty. He had a houseful of food. He always had food for visitors.

"People get lost on these marshes ever day in the holiday season. I always entertain them. In winter it is different. In winter I do my work. But during the summer I am at everyone's disposal—everyone's." He beamed at her in a manner, which she suddenly found sinister.

"I'd almost forgotten," she said. "I'm meeting my mother at three and she mustn't stand about with her sciatica."

"Ah, yes," said the host, rising. "Terrible of me not to think. She certainly mustn't stand about with her sciatica." He excused himself pleasantly for keeping her talking so long and Laura rose to go, but found herself looking at a small but businesslike revolver, which Mr. Bleriot was presenting with grim efficiency.

"Sit down," said Mr. Bleriot. Laura obeyed, since as she believed her host to have committed three murders already, there seemed no reason why he should stick at a fourth.

Mr. Bleriot, holding his position, took out of his jacket pocket with his left hand a police whistle. On this he blew three shrill blasts. The deaf old woman appeared.

"This young lady," said Mr. Bleriot, "is wanted by the police. You will keep her covered whilst I go and *get* the police."

"I don't know, I'm sure," said the crone. Mr. Bleriot nodded, as though satisfied with this reply. Laura tensed herself to spring as the revolver changed hands, but the exchange was made so neatly that there was no chance of interference without the risk of serious injury. She sank back again, and it was without surprise that, ten minutes later, she had the

felicitation of seeing her host, suitcase in hand and dressed in a tweed suit, walking rapidly away in the direction of the main road.

“One thing,” thought Laura, philosophically, “it is only a question of time before the police arrive, and they ought to catch him easily, since he’s on foot.”

“Police?” said the crone, as though she read Laura’s thought. “No police come here. Be gone for good that old person of mine be. Said that would, one fine day. Maddier than Tuesday, that be.”

“I’m not talking about him,” said Laura. “His snake-charmer was caught on the marshes last night when he left here. The police are holding him for questioning, and as soon as that’s through they’ll be here, the inspector from Norwich and his men. A bit silly you’ll look, holding me up like this with that gun, now, won’t you?”

During this speech, which the woman leaned over to hear, Laura had wriggled forward in her chair. As she finished speaking she gave a sudden kick upward and lofted the revolver out of the old crone’s hand. It went off, and she was on it as it fell.

“I don’t think I ought to stay,” she said. “He isn’t working alone. He can’t be. If you don’t object, I’m going to oil out while the going is good. The police can do any searching. Besides, I ought to get after him. He can’t travel fast with that suitcase. But you’ll have to go along as well. I can’t have you staying behind and destroying all the evidence as soon as I’ve gone, you know.” She prodded the old woman gently with the revolver, and indicated that she was to march.

“I’m a-going to my sister’s over the marshes,” bellowed the crone. “All mad together, that seem!” She got up. Laura let her go, not knowing how to hold her if she were not afraid of the revolver, and watched her follow the causeway until she was only a speck in the distance.

“Well, that’s that. There’s a catch in it somewhere,” said Laura aloud, when, the old woman having vanished across the marshes, she had to decide upon her own immediate course of action. “I might as well have a look round while I’m here, I suppose.”

A thorough inspection of the house, including the drawers of a desk in the room, which had been used by the occupant as a study, failed to reveal anything which seemed of the slightest importance. There were some poems in manuscript, some daubs in water-colour of what seemed to be surrealist subjects, and a collection of books on Broadland. There were no

worsted serpents, no other lethal weapons. Even the kitchen knives were worn and blunt. The house merely gave a fairly complete picture of a gentleman of leisure (with an active but well-sublimated subconscious mind, perhaps) employing himself in his own way and with innocent devices upon holiday. There was not even any dark-blue velvet to be found. With a lively recollection of the muffled oars and rowlocks she had seen, Laura looked especially for the velvet.

Just as she was preparing to leave, two convoys of police were converging upon the farm. The one, led by the inspector and reinforced by the sergeant, was still on its way, but the other, to her amazement, proved to consist of the householder himself (still carrying his suitcase), a policeman, and an A.A. scout. Both of these were wheeling bicycles.

“Well,” said Mr. Bleriot, upon the arrival of his party at the farm, “you see! I knew she was up to no good. Where is my housekeeper?” he demanded. “What have you done with the pearls? Search the house, you two men, whilst I remain here with the prisoner! Or—no! I will help in the search. Constable, you are in charge of the prisoner.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” said the policeman, removing his helmet and staring at Laura. “He said you broke in and menaced him with a gun. Have you got a gun?” he continued, as Amos Bleriot and the A.A. man went out and could be heard ransacking rooms.

“Well, yes,” replied Laura, taking it out. “But it belongs to him. I mean, he threatened me with it, and—”

“You take the upstairs!” shouted Amos Bleriot from without. “And look especially in the wardrobe. Search it thoroughly! A pound if you find the pearls still there!”

“Look bad, you know,” said the country policeman to Laura. “How do I know you’re telling the truth about it? He say you have a gun, and sure enough you have.”

“You’d better make a note of it,” said Laura.

“And that’s wholly what I intend,” replied the policeman, disregarding the sarcasm, and taking out his notebook. “What’s the date?”

It took them a quarter of an hour to get all the particulars set out relating to Laura’s possession of the revolver, and, by the time they had finished, the inspector and his party were at the door. The inspector’s knock was preceded by a shout from the scout, who was still busy trying to earn his pound.

“Can’t find nothing in the wardrobe or the drawers and suitcases, sir!”

“You open the door,” said the policeman to Laura, after both of them had waited a minute or two for the householder himself to do so, “and don’t forget I’ve got my eye on you. Seem the gentleman’s gone to sleep in the next room, or something.”

But the gentleman was nowhere to be found, and neither was the bicycle belonging to the A.A. scout. The policeman’s bicycle, although present, was out of commission owing to the unfortunate circumstance of its having big, untidy slashes in both tyres, slashes which had ripped the inner tubing as well as the covers.

The inspector had some remarks to make about policemen who harried foolish but innocent young ladies whilst their real prey slashed bicycle tyres and rode away on borrowed machines. Then he, too, made a search of the house, but beyond the discovery, sworn to by Laura, that Mr. Bleriot must have changed his clothes again, for the tweed suit in which he had made his first departure lay neatly folded on one of the chairs in the study and the suitcase lay open and empty on the table, nothing came to light.

“And that’s that,” observed the inspector bitterly. “A nice mess we’ve made of it. Couldn’t you see the young lady’s explanation had to be believed, and that that fellow was the one to keep the tabs on?” he demanded irascibly of the country policeman.

“No, sir,” said the policeman, respectfully. “But I saw the wanted man, sir. I should know him again.”

“Well, you’d better shove that useless jigger of yours back to wherever you’ve come from and have a look for him,” said the inspector sourly.

“I’m giving up detection,” said Laura, disgustedly, having been compelled to listen to a long lecture from the inspector on the iniquity of, and the probably penalties for, obstructing the police. “I think a change of scene might be a jolly good idea after all.”

She returned disconsolately in charge of the sergeant to the cruiser, in which the patient Alice and the bored but good-tempered Kitty were still patrolling up and down the River Bure. They were glad to see her and she was more than glad to see them. The sergeant’s humorous remarks had been difficult to bear.

“Mind you, ma’am,” said the inspector on the telephone to Mrs. Bradley later, “although the young lady made a mess of it, she’s not done so badly as all that, from our point of view. He can be sworn to by that bat-

eyed constable, and if we can find him we can hold him for stolen and damaged bicycles, and all that revolver-pulling stuff. And, of course, we know the old woman isn't in it. She was just a stooge, and a good one, I should say. She's been known in these parts all her life. She certainly knows nothing of anything fishy, although it's taken us all our time getting anything out of her. She's hard and shrewd enough, but she swears she doesn't know what this chap's game was. Just thought he was 'natural' she says, and I believe her. Says she was well-paid for being his housekeeper, and that he was very peculiar. He's only been in the house a fortnight, she says, and has never been out until today. Says he bought the house six months ago, when the owner died, and installed her as housekeeper straight away, although she lived there alone for the following five and a half months. I can't make head or tail of it, ma'am, but I'm certain she's telling the truth. I've checked up as much as I can from other farms round about, but it doesn't lead anywhere at all. He *may* be our murderer. The old woman admits the peddler came to the house last night, but she didn't hear the conversation and there was nothing I could get her to tell me about the worsted vipers. She doesn't seem to have seen one. She never reads the papers, because her sight is so bad, and that, of course, may have been to the man's advantage. If you can throw any light, ma'am, I shall be much obliged. Scotland Yard are sending a man. They've identified the third body positively. It's another street-walker, by the name of Rilitz, and she also attended at that club."

Mrs. Bradley did not affect to be able to "throw any light," but sighed with relief to think of her self-appointed assistant Laura Menzies safely in the south of the county harmlessly pursuing her holiday activities with friends.

"Anyway, ma'am," said the inspector, "there's one comfort. Your theory that there would be another murder hasn't proved itself yet. Have a job to, if you saw the cordon I've drawn round the district. I'll back that even a mousehold couldn't worm its way through without my knowledge."

"Mousehold?" said Mrs. Bradley. "Why, that was the name used by the man on the island. You remember that story we had from the two boys, Ian and Edward?"

"Perfectly, ma'am. But a mousehold only signifies a ferret round about these parts. There's plenty of these local names. I'm a Londoner myself, but

that's one of the ones that always struck me particular. You didn't think that was his name, ma'am?"

Before Mrs. Bradley could reply the telephone rang. The inspector's face hardened as he listened.

"The fourth body, I presume?" said Mrs. Bradley, as he put down the receiver.

"An elderly man, this time. Found dead in a field. May have no connection with this case. If it hasn't, I shall get to work on it, and leave this business to the Yard. The dead women are their pigeon, and so is your Mr. Bleriot, come to that. Although what they'll make of a district like this, unless their man knows it thoroughly, is more than I can say."

"Who found the body?" Mrs. Bradley enquired.

"Some people named Potter. Just another lot of holidaymakers. This time staying at Cromer. They've reported the body at Stalham. Out for a walk, they say, and came upon it on a footpath." He reached for his pen, looking haggard. "The Chief Constable will take this big," he added. "He's been on to me proper already, and the superintendent isn't too happy, either."

• CHAPTER 15 •

“I know what ‘it’ means well enough when I find a thing,” said the Duck: “it’s generally a frog or a worm. The question is, what did the Archbishop find?”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The Potters were a cheerful, noisy family, consisting of Mr. Potter, who played golf, Mrs. Potter, who played golf, too, but so much better that they usually played on different courses to keep the peace, Eddie Potter, who liked swimming, boating, and playing the saxophone, and Betty Potter, who liked dancing, tennis, and radio programmes.

Among people with tastes so diverse and family ties so powerful there was always a six-months’ argument about a holiday centre. They did not want to be separated from one another—this feeling was perfectly genuine, and was, in fact, a kind of family religion—and yet each fought hard for a locality in which his or her own particular bent could achieve full scope.

Mr. and Mrs. Potter were often in agreement, for, provided that the place was so situated that two or more golf courses were within easy reach of the hotel, both were perfectly satisfied, and would exchange courses and thereafter gossip about the courses, with a friendly readiness, which held no rivalry. Occasionally, Eddie and Betty could combine, but, whatever the difficulties in the way of a friendly agreement, this admirable family, year after year, surmounted them, and in the end, a happy holiday was enjoyed by all.

The problem was solved in the particular year under review by the choice of Cromer as a holiday resort. Here, as those who have visited it will know, there were golf links adjoining the town, with a choice of further golf links at Sheringham and West Runton. There was, of course, plenty of tennis by the season, the day, the half-day, or even by the hour; swimming

was from a firm, sandy shore, and the hotel at which the family elected to stay offered dancing and (for those who liked it) the radio.

Yet it was given to this pleasant, inoffensive party (although not in Cromer itself) to discover the fourth body.

Besides their immediate preoccupations with golf, swimming, tennis, and dancing, the Potters were all fond of what they termed “a stroll.” With them, strolling entailed all the arduous labour of rough walking combined with the necessity, as they saw it, of covering not fewer than fifteen miles in a day.

When they had been at Cromer for just over a week, Eddie Potter suggested, on the morning of the Bank Holiday Monday, a “stroll,” adding the reason, “Everything will be lousy here today.”

“Where to?” enquired his sister, who was still seated at the breakfast table consuming toast and marmalade, for which she had a passion.

“Mundesley.”

“How far?”

“Seven and a half.”

“Good enough. What about Mum and Dad?”

“Said they’d come. Upstairs now, getting ready.”

“Right.” Hastily accounting for the last piece of toast, Betty gulped down the rest of her coffee, tapped a cigarette on the top of the marmalade container, accepted a light from her brother, and went off to change her shoes.

The walk was along the coast. Occasionally it became necessary to go inland because of cliff falls. The walk was enjoyable and successful, so much so that, after they had returned to the hotel, Mr. Potter proposed that they should walk to Mundesley again on the following day and go on to Happisburgh instead of returning by way of Knapton, Trunch, and South Repps as they had done on the previous day.

The walk would have proved to some people, at any rate after Paston had been left behind and the bungalows were becoming a little monotonous, slightly disappointing; but to the admirable Potters the distance walked counted for a great deal more than any incidental scenery. In any case, Happisburgh was well worth visiting, for it was a pleasant old village very close to the sea. Perched on high cliffs, the family studied the view, rested (having lunched in Mundesley), ate the chocolate they had brought with them, and began to discuss the question of returning to Cromer, a point

which had not been referred to when Mr. Potter had made his suggestion for continuing the walk.

They enquired in the village for the nearest railway station, and learned that they could get to a station at Stalham, a walk of about five miles, or to one at North Walsham, but that was a good deal further off. It did not occur to any of the four to ask for a conveyance from Happisburgh. Stalham was the station decided upon, and the indefatigable party set out, carrying complicated directions in their heads about lanes which cut off half a mile, and tracks from which one turned sharp onto the road at the bottom of the hill.

The hill, some fifty feet high, was a landmark, and they anticipated no difficulty in following these directions, particularly as there was nothing more to do, once the sharp turn had been made, except to keep straight on along the road.

They reached the hill and surmounted it, but the information given them had been supplied by people who knew the road so well that they could not envisage the traps it might hold for strangers. The lane, instead of proceeding directly up and over the hill, as the Potters, quite reasonably, had taken for granted it would, descended, after a right-angle turn, to the south before proceeding to cross the rest of the hill to the straight road into Stalham.

“Gone wrong somewhere,” said Eddie, regarding a wide-forking lane with a frown. “Better go left, I should think. The other way seems to go over towards North Walsham, from what I remember of the map.”

This error, pardonable in the circumstances, took the party onto a common, for, almost sternly, it seemed, they proceeded to avoid another road which would have led them back onto their route. They came, however, upon a road from the north which was continued directly southward by a footpath, and this footpath the party, still guided by fate, decided to pursue. They were not particularly tired, and the sun was still high.

Halfway along the footpath they found the body. It was that of an elderly man, dressed in the black, which represents still, among the older generation, the villager’s Sunday best. He was lying by the side of the footpath and in line with it. Near him was a massive walking stick with a crook handle and a silver band. There was no blood on the stick, and Eddie,

picking it up with his handkerchief over his hand, pointed out that it was not heavy enough to have made the wounds on the head.

The effects of the discovery of the body were various upon the members of the blameless family. Eddie examined the stick. Mrs. Potter dismissed herself from the business with a howl of acute dismay. Mr. Potter looked and felt sick, but knelt down beside the very dead man with the laudable intention of making certain that he was dead. Betty, an omnivorous reader of detective stories, said sharply, "Get up, Dad! You might disturb some clues. We ought to hurry along and get hold of a policeman or a doctor."

It was agreed, on this, that Betty and her father should remain beside the body, and that Eddie and his mother should go forward. As it happened, they got into Stalham without further deviation from the track, for the footpath came out into a lane, and that same fate, which had played tricks on the Potters so far, now relented, and caused Mrs. Potter and Eddie to take the right turning instead of a possible wrong one, and they found themselves, within reasonable time, in the village. Here Eddie reported the finding of the body. A doctor and a policeman went back with them. They were all held in Stalham and closely questioned after that. A murder can be as disconcerting, in some ways, to the innocent as to the guilty.

"Still, they seem all right, ma'am," concluded the inspector, concluding this artless narrative to Mrs. Bradley. "But, of course, we shall have to keep an eye on them, same as on all the people who've discovered bodies."

"Including my three students?" suggested Mrs. Bradley. "I thought I had persuaded you—"

"Routine, ma'am. What do you make of it being a man, this time? A local, too. Well known in the neighbourhood. Seems to have been a fairly harmless old fellow. No reason why anybody should lay for him, so far as is known."

"Was there a worsted viper on him, Inspector?"

"Funnily enough, ma'am, there was not. And, of course, he'd been killed on the previous day—Bank Holiday Monday. His clothes would have proved that, apart from the doctor's report."

"His clothes might have proved that he had been killed on the Sunday, apart from the doctor's report," Mrs. Bradley pointed out.

"Like to go over and see the place, ma'am?"

“I *intend* to go over and see the place, Inspector. It will be odd if, this time, nothing assists our efforts.”

“About time something did,” the inspector grunted. “I’m getting fed up, ma’am, with hints in the papers it’s time I got a move on and made an arrest. Pity we missed that fellow in the house on the marshes. Might easily be your Mr. Bleriot. Those crack-brained fools! Fancy being had with a trick like that! And we can’t get track of him, either. I’ve had a couple of dozen extra men on duty in Yarmouth this afternoon, but not a report has come in.”

“Not surprising, considering we don’t even know how he was dressed. But I think our murderers have made the mistake of a lifetime.”

“That suitcase business was clever—very neat. What makes you think they’ve slipped up this time, ma’am?”

“First, the fact that they have killed not only a man, but a local man. That seems outside their scope and, I imagine, their plan. Secondly, there is no worsted viper. I think this old man was a potential danger to them. He had seen or heard something which might prove serious for them, and his murder was to a great extent unpremeditated. Of course,” she added, “we mustn’t lose sight of the fact that this may be totally unconnected with the other murders, as you indicated.”

“Murder’s like a disease. It can be catching,” amended the inspector, morosely.

Mrs. Bradley did not accompany him to Stalham. She went by herself next day, joined in gossip at the hotel where she had her lunch and heard from the waitress a story, which had not been given to the police. Even to her it was offered apologetically, although by her mention of gypsies (thinking of the girls’ prisoner), she had asked for it.

It seemed that just out of Stalham lived a family reported to be “settled-down” gypsies. They had lived there for three generations, were named Huzy (a variant, Mrs. Bradley thought, of a Hungarian name) and were certainly of mixed or foreign blood. There was a rumour (not that anybody was silly enough to believe it, Mrs. Bradley was assured) that the daughter, a woman of about forty, was a witch, and that, having set her cap in vain for five years or so at the old man, she had decided to take her revenge on him by bringing about his death.

She had uttered no threats, but had made current certain hints and veiled promises that he would die “before Christmas.” She had a perfect

alibi for the time of the old man's death, which had been fixed by the doctor at between two o'clock and four on the afternoon of the Bank Holiday, for she had been serving refreshments in Stalham to holiday-makers at a booth near the river, and the stall-keepers on either side, men whose word there was no reason to doubt, were prepared to swear that she had not left the river-bank from eight o'clock that morning until the midday. After that she had gone into the town to get a drink at a small inn, where she was well known and could again be sworn to, and had left it at one, to return to the booth. There she had remained until five, when she went off again for half an hour, this time to her home to make herself a cup of tea. She had come back at twenty to six, and had remained at the booth until eight, when she had gone off for another drink.

Mrs. Bradley obtained the address and went to call. It was a dirty house, foetid and dark. An old woman opened the door.

"Good morning," said Mrs. Bradley. "Is your daughter Martha at home?"

"No," replied the crone.

"A pity," said Mrs. Bradley. "I want to look at her doll."

"Doll? That haven't got no doll. That isn't a child."

"No. Has she any pins or rusty nails?"

The old woman slammed the door, but before Mrs. Bradley, who had retired with deliberate slowness from the field, had gone ten yards, it was opened again. The woman who opened it this time looked about forty, and was handsome, in a bold, coarse style.

"I've done nothing wrong," said the woman.

"No?" said Mrs. Bradley. "What *did* you do? Hit the doll on the back of the head?"

"No. I mean no harm." She certainly understood the reference to the doll, Mrs. Bradley was interested to notice.

"You've heard that Elias Bennett is dead, though, haven't you? May I come in and see the doll?"

"No, you mayn't. What business is it of yours?"

"Only that I don't want to see an innocent person arrested for the murder."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Be off!"

She, too, slammed the door. Mrs. Bradley retreated thoughtfully, watched, she well knew, from behind the filthy curtains, which obscured the

front room from people passing by in the street. When she had gone a few paces down the road she halted, took from her capacious skirt-pocket a small bag, and took out of the bag a worsted viper, which she had constructed, with minute care, to resemble those found on the bodies.

By the time she reached the door for the third time it was half open. A dark hand snatched her inside and closed the door behind her. The voice of the witch said, "Why not you say where you come from? What do you want?"

"They want to know," said Mrs. Bradley, "how much your brother told the police, that's all. And they want to have a report about the doll."

"But they know naught about the doll," the woman expostulated. "Private to me, that is. Nought to do with them."

"They know everything," said Mrs. Bradley, solemnly. "Come now. If you wish to keep on their right side, show me the doll; I want to get back and make my report that you are innocent."

"Innocent? I never killed old Elias!"

"They will know that, when I have seen the doll."

Without another word, the woman led her up uncarpeted stairs to a bedroom. The only furnishings were an unmade bed, a chair whose cane seat had worn down into a kind of funnel-shape, a huge mahogany wardrobe, and a small, flyblown mirror, hanging over the mantelpiece. The ceiling was dark grey, the walls were peeling, the window was thick with dirt.

The woman shut the door and placed the chair under the handle, and then went across to the wardrobe, which she opened.

"There it is, then," she said; adding in spiteful tones, "See what you can make out of that!"

Mrs. Bradley took the doll down. It was dressed in imitation of a farmer's working clothes, breeches, gaiters, and all. It wore a round, pie-dish sort of hat, and little bits of hair had been glued carefully on to its cheeks and chin to make whiskers.

Mrs. Bradley removed the hat. The doll's head was intact. She took out her small magnifying glass.

"I see you have removed the pins," she said. "A good thing indeed for you that you did not touch the head."

She handed the doll to its owner, and walked towards the door, holding a hand-bag mirror so that she could keep watch on the woman's

movements. The witch, however, did nothing except to put the doll carefully back, but, for some reason, her hand fumbled. As she went down on her knees to pick up the pieces, she gave a half-glance round. Her face was grey with terror. Mrs. Bradley turned round and raised her left hand.

“Hic, haec, hoc, decapitate cock,” she said solemnly. Then, as she went out, “And leave evil alone. It is not for you,” she added.

She went to the superintendent with her story.

“There is no doubt that the worsted viper was a password into the house, and there is no doubt that the person who made that doll into the likeness of the farmer could have made the vipers,” she said. “In fact, it struck me that the leather used for the doll’s gaiters was the same as that from which the heads of the vipers had been cut. There’s guilty knowledge of some kind in that house. What they do there, besides manufacture vipers, of course, I don’t know, but perhaps it will give us a lead. Do you think you could put a discreet and responsible sergeant onto it quietly? I’m afraid Mr. Os wouldn’t like it if I bothered him with it and it proved to be a false trail.”

“I could, ma’am, certainly. Although, of course, if all they do there is to manufacture the vipers as toys, it won’t lead us far.”

“I don’t see why not. There must be some connection between the man who peddles the vipers and the people who use them, and the inference is, you know, that the farmer had obtained some knowledge of the transactions of the murderers—or they thought he had!—which would account for the fact they killed him.”

“You don’t mean the Huzys? Although, of course, that peddler was one of them.”

“No. I mean the gang, including my precious Mr. Bleriot, who may be for them or against them, but is certainly mixed up in their concerns.”

“I’ll see to it, ma’am, unless, of course, Mr. Os think of seeing them for himself. If so, I can’t interfere, as that is in charge of the case.”

“Quite, yes. No, it’s just an idea of mine that the Huzys may know something more about the vipers. If they do, it might start a trail.”

“Which we could well do with. The Chief Constable, that rib Mr. Os something unmerciful yesterday. Like a bear that was, this morning.”

“Small wonder,” said Mrs. Bradley.

• CHAPTER 16 •

“Please, would you tell me...why your cat grins like that?”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“But I don’t see how you deduced the doll,” said Jonathan. At his aunt’s request, he had picked her up at Stalham and they were cruising leisurely on Barton Broad.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mrs. Bradley replied. “When you hear prophecies that people are going to die within a given time, coupled with a reference to witchcraft, a doll is the most likely thing. She might have worked her spells some other way, but, in view of the careful manufacture of the vipers, it seemed worth while to assume that a doll in which the woman stuck pins would be the means chosen to bring about the death.”

“You speak seriously,” said the young man. “You don’t believe in all that rot?”

“I have known various instances in which it has been successful,” Mrs. Bradley replied, “but only, of course, when the threatened person has known what was being done and believed in the efficacy of the magic. One can read of proved instances, too.” (*Witchcraft: Its Power in the World Today* by William Seabrook, Harrap, 1941.)

“But the old fellow didn’t believe in it, did he?”

“We don’t know. He may not have known it was being tried, which would mean that Martha Huzy is not a skilled practitioner, or she would have told him. In any case, it doesn’t matter now.”

“Well, I don’t know. He was killed.”

“Yes. But she didn’t kill him.”

“She may know all about it.”

“That is for the police to find out—how much she knew about the death. My own impression is that she knew nothing. There was nothing

faked or out of the ordinary in her alibi. The family have had a booth in Stalham on August Bank Holidays for years. Whit Mondays, too.”

“Yes, I see. When do we go along and have a look at this field? Or don’t we?”

“There would be no profit in going to see the field, child. And the movements of Elias Bennett up to the time of his death have been satisfactorily accounted for, and were innocent enough. He had been to place flowers on his wife’s grave in the morning, and was to have attended a fête, held by the Sons of Temperance in the afternoon. It was when he was on his way to the meeting place, according to the police, that he was struck down.”

The police had interviewed the local secretary of the Sons of Temperance, and Mrs. Bradley proceeded to follow their example. The secretary proved to be employed by a firm of boat-builders, and was a man of sixty-four. He was very ready to talk about the murder, which, naturally, had made a very great stir in the neighbourhood, and seemed to take for granted Mrs. Bradley’s right to question him.

The little band of men and women who had planned the outing had been disappointed when Elias had failed to meet them on the Bank Holiday, but were not altogether surprised.

“How was that?” enquired Mrs. Bradley.

Well, it was this way: Elias had a setter bitch of which he was very fond, and the dog had been suffering from some mysterious malady for a couple of days. He had dosed her himself, and had sent along very early on Monday morning to say that if the bitch was no better he should not leave her.

“Very thorough,” said Mrs. Bradley; but she was not referring to Elias.

The most hopeful method of approach, now that she had established a connection between the Huzys and the worsted vipers, was to terrify the gypsies into further revelations. To this end, she went into Stalham and purchased a large tin of table salt, of a kind which did not cake but poured out of a small round hole in the lid.

She went by night to the house where the Huzys lived, and, unstopping the tin by removing the small rubber plug in the lid, she poured salt generously on to the ground in front of the dirty front window. Stopping only for a second to admire the shape of her handiwork by the light of a

small electric torch, she walked back to the waterside and was taken out to *O'Reilly* in a dinghy.

"Well?" said Jonathan grinning. "Did you ill-wish them?"

"They will think so," his aunt replied. "If they had been Italians it would have more success, but no doubt they will know enough of the Black Art to comprehend the curse which is upon them."

"You didn't really curse them, did you?" asked Deborah curiously. Mrs. Bradley cackled.

"No," she answered. "But if their consciences are sufficiently guilty, we shall find that there is no need. I will teach poor Martha Huzy more about witchcraft in a fortnight than she has been able to learn in forty years," she added, with immense satisfaction, "unless she tells me what I want to know."

Very early next morning, leaving the young people still asleep, Mrs. Bradley got up and went ashore in the dinghy. It was still just before sunrise when she reached the house occupied by the Huzys, but it was light enough for her to be able to see the large cross formed of the poured salt which still decorated the hard ground under the window.

Later in the morning, after she had breakfasted, she went to call on the family. The cross in salt was still there. She pointed it out to the crone who came to the door.

"Somebody seems to dislike you," she observed. "Is your daughter Martha at home?"

"No, that isn't, then."

"She had better be in this afternoon," said Mrs. Bradley, mildly, looking at the old woman. The crone mumbled. "Oh, and you might give her this when you see her," Mrs. Bradley continued, producing a couple of shreds of worsted cloth tied up with a piece of scarlet wool. "It won't hurt her if she behaves herself."

She walked briskly away, leaving the old woman alternately staring after her and looking down at the thing in her hand.

Martha was in when she called in the afternoon. In fact, she opened the door to her. She was no longer the unkempt and dirty creature of the day before, but had washed herself, reddened her lips, put powder on her face, and was dressed in a respectable dark coat and a skirt and a yellow blouse.

"Come in," she said. "What did you send me that old rag for?"

“Fun,” said Mrs. Bradley gravely. “But I don’t need to come in, thank you. All I want to know is where you are going to take the next viper.”

“How should I know anything about that?”

“Come now. Think.”

“I don’t know, I tell you.”

“Very well. Hang the rags from the top window if you change your mind.”

The woman slammed the door. Mrs. Bradley stood a moment looking down on the salt. She shook her head, muttered over the cross, and scuffled her feet on the ground to make the rough shape of a pentagram. Then she went back to the boat, certain that she had been watched from the dirty front-room window.

They spent the day sailing, and in the late evening moored the boat and sat talking, reading, and smoking until eleven.

“Aren’t you going ashore tonight?” asked Jonathan, looking at his watch in the light of the cabin lamp.

“No, not tonight,” said his aunt. She did not, in fact, go ashore again in Stalham for the next two days. On the morning of the third day she returned to the house with her tin of salt, made a second cross just before the door and daintily touched up the first one, which, she observed with satisfaction, the family had not dared to destroy. Then she went back to the boat, but had Jonathan moor for the night a little nearer the shore.

She sat up that night, prepared for eventualities, and occupied herself in making a small coat and skirt, doll’s size, and a tiny yellow blouse. Her psychological foresight was not at fault. At about three in the morning she heard the sound of a boat. She went up on deck and hailed it softly.

“Boat ahoy! Is that you, Martha?” Then she switched on her torch.

“Put that out!” said a man’s voice. “Do you want everybody to know?”

Mrs. Bradley kept the torch switched on as the boat approached.

“Put it out!” said the man in the boat, speaking savagely but still quietly. “I shan’t come aboard if you don’t!”

“You are not asked to come aboard,” Mrs. Bradley replied. “Speak from where you are. What is the message?”

“Martha Huzy says she’ll let you know if you’ll come to the house with me now.”

“Go back, and tell Martha that I have made the clothes for the doll.”

“I’m coming aboard,” said the man.

Mrs. Bradley lowered the torch until it showed the small revolver she also held.

“I don’t advise it,” she said. “Repeat my message.”

“You’ve made the clothes for the doll. Is that all?”

“It will be quite enough,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“But she said particularly I’d have to come aboard to give you the answer you asked for. Can’t expect me to shout it out loud,” he still protested.

“You must find some other way of delivering it, then. In writing, for example. Surely Martha, with all her cleverness, can write. Go back and ask her to write it. And don’t forget about the clothes for the doll.”

Repercussions to this were almost immediate. At about ten o’clock in the morning Mrs. Bradley went ashore, but before she had entered the village she encountered the old woman, who accosted her.

“Our Martha want to see you.”

Mrs. Bradley accompanied her to the house. Martha, coarse and heavy-featured, was in bed. The room stank. Fastened outside the window was the twist of rag bound with scarlet wool.

“Ah,” said Mrs. Bradley, “you are not feeling well.”

“No, I’m not well,” said the woman. She leaned up on her elbow and fixed upon Mrs. Bradley her narrow, gypsy eyes. “Nor I shan’t be well, with you about. What for do you want to interfere?”

“In the interests of intellectual curiosity,” Mrs. Bradley replied. “Come now. The vipers. You make them. Your brother takes them—or did take them, before the police took him up—to a man whose name may be unknown to you, but whom I know as Amos Bleriot. This man had to leave the place where he was staying. He left in a hurry, because the police were on his track. Where did he go?”

“Tell me where my pain is,” said the woman.

“You have no pain at present,” Mrs. Bradley responded. “But you will have pain in the stomach, pain in the head, and pain in the left knee until I know what you know.” She glanced at her watch. “You will begin to feel the pains in three hours from now, and you know as well as I do what the end must be, so tell me the truth, and do not try to overreach me.”

“All right,” said the woman, “but how shall I know...?”

“Don’t ask silly questions. You know perfectly well how you will know.”

“Will you take the curse from the house?”

“You know that I will. Come now, the time passes. Speak, or later you will be unable to speak or think.”

The woman swallowed, lay down, hunched up her knees, and began to moan.

“Come,” said Mrs. Bradley, implacably.

“You won’t tell them I told you?”

“I shall tell them nothing.” She did not add that she did not know whom to tell.

“Well,” said Martha Huzy, unwillingly, “you could go to the Three Hogs Tavern in Norwich. I say I’ll send them someone, and that might as well be you. They won’t know any different I wholly suppose.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. Bradley. “You didn’t kill Elias Bennett, I presume?”

“I did not, and don’t know who did. Harmless, that was, like a child, the poor old man.”

“You were going to kill him, though, weren’t you? But never mind that now. By the time the spell is ready to work, I shall know whether you have deceived me.”

“You want to wait for Mousehold,” said Martha Huzy. Mrs. Bradley thanked her again, with a smile that made her shrink back. As she made her way to the waterside she saw the man on whom she had flashed her torch the night before.

A plain-clothes policeman was tagging along behind him.

“Ah!” said Mrs. Bradley aloud. She turned about and returned to Martha Huzy, muttering as she did so.

“If I can catch him once upon the hip,

“I will feed fat the ancient grudge I bear him.”

It was a statement extraordinarily out of keeping with her usual philosophy of life.

Martha’s mother once again opened the door.

“What you want bothering again for?” she demanded. Mrs. Bradley smiled.

“Who taught Martha to make dolls?” she asked.

“Better you ask her that yourself,” replied the crone, retreating into the dingy passage and yelling up the stairs to her daughter.

Mrs. Bradley went upstairs and walked into Martha’s room. Her victim was still in bed, but had raised herself to a sitting position at the sound of the voices below. She turned a haggard, haunted gaze upon her visitor.

“What you want this time?” she enquired with some resentment. “Isn’t that old spell you do enough?”

Mrs. Bradley walked to the window, stood with her back to the uncleaned panes, and said, “Where did you learn to make dolls?”

“I don’t learn. That’s easy. Always been clever with my fingers,” said Martha Huzy, but with no lessening of her anxious expression.

“Come, now,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I don’t want to put the word into your mouth, but if you don’t tell *me* I shall tell *him* that I’m bound for the Three Hogs Tavern, and then where will you be?”

The terrified woman shrank back.

“You can’t make me tell you,” she said. “You can’t make me tell you. I don’t learn from nobody how to make them. I know from a little tiny girl.”

“From how little tiny a girl, I wonder?” said Mrs. Bradley. She went swiftly over to the wardrobe and drew out the battered doll, which had been baptised according to the unholy rites of witchcraft with the name of Elias Bennett. “Who made this thing? Tell me.”

“I make it myself,” said Martha obstinately. “I can’t help what you believe. I make it myself.”

“Aha!” said Mrs. Bradley. She put the doll back on the shelf. “Have you a dog?” she enquired.

“Aye,” said the woman, surprised at the sudden change of subject. But it was not, after all a change of subject, for Mrs. Bradley continued, “And what do you give your poor dog?”

The woman in the bed gave a moan, and stretched out her head as though she felt some almost intolerable pain at the back of her neck.

“All right,” said Mrs. Bradley. “This is all I wanted to know.”

• CHAPTER 17 •

“I think I should understand that better,” Alice said, very politely, “if I had it written down; but I can’t quite follow it as you say it.”

“That’s nothing to what I could say if I chose,” the Duchess replied, in a pleased tone.

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

In spite of Jonathan’s protests and Deborah’s pleading, Mrs. Bradley went alone into Norwich, and had some difficulty in locating the Three Hogs Tavern. It was a high, narrow-fronted house with a small bow-window and two entrances from the street. One entrance was to the private, the other to the public bar. Inside the private bar a direction indicated a short passage through a low archway to what was called the Ladies’ Saloon.

It was not cattle-market day, so that, except for three men drinking beer and talking about hay, there was nobody in the place except the barman.

Having no instructions, Mrs. Bradley went into the public bar and called for half a pint of draught ale. She stood at the counter drinking it slowly, and before she had finished more than a third of it a man came in with a ferret in his pocket. He called for a pint of draught ale and, taking the ferret out, began to play with it along the counter, gradually allowing it to approach Mrs. Bradley’s glass.

“Hey, Mousehold, mind Ticky!” said the barman.

“I don’t object in the least to Ticky,” said Mrs. Bradley, allowing the ferret to sniff her fingers. “It isn’t as though he’s a snake.”

The barman went off past a partition to serve in the private bar, and when he had gone, the owner of the ferret put it in his pocket, jerked his head towards the door, and said to Mrs. Bradley, “Come on.”

She followed him into the street, and he led the way to the cathedral. They passed through an arched gateway into the cathedral-close, and here

the man walked even more slowly than he had done along the street and across Tombland.

“You’re from Huzy, I suppose?” said he.

“From Martha Huzy. The police have Huzy, as you ought to know,” Mrs. Bradley replied.

“Could you deposit a viper if we asked you?”

“Yes, if I knew where, and at what time to do it.”

“I don’t know anything, mind,” the man went on, “except they told me to tell you to put it on what you find in the woods at the east end of Horsey Mere.”

“The east end?” said Mrs. Bradley. “Right.”

They passed into the great cathedral and out, by way of the south aisle, into the cloisters.

“But what is it all about?” asked Mrs. Bradley.

“Search me,” the man replied, with apparent frankness. “I reckon they’re crazy, but I get five bob a time for passing on the messages they want, and that’s all it matters to me.”

“You’re not a native of these parts?”

“Who? Me? Not much I’m not. What do you take me for?”

“A London man.” She felt it would be impolitic to continue asking him questions, and paused for a moment at the south-west angle of the cloisters to obtain a view of the cathedral tower and spire. “What about the viper?” she added, after a moment. The man put his hand in his pocket and drew out one of the evil little toys. Mrs. Bradley put it carefully away, and the ferret, which had been putting out its head from the man’s pocket and had shown interest in its surroundings, selected this particular moment to run down the man’s trouser-leg and begin to explore the cloisters.

The man went after it. He picked it up, put it in his pocket and, continuing his progress, was gone without another word to Mrs. Bradley.

She went back into the nave of the cathedral, but it was scarcely possible to hurry sufficiently in such a place as to seem to be chasing after him, so she stayed to examine the massive pillars and to take the Processional Path round the back of the altar.

This brought her into the most easterly part of the cathedral, and this fact, in conjunction with two otherwise unrelated points seemed to make a sound-track in her brain.

“East end; east end; east end,” she thought. The next body was to be at the east end of Horsey Mere. The dead prostitutes had come from the East End. She was in the east end of Norwich Cathedral. “Nonsense,” she said to herself. “There’s nothing in it. Just a rather ridiculous association of ideas.”

She went into the close again and out into Tombland. From there she went to the hotel at which, nominally, she was staying, and telephoned Inspector Os.

“Yes, we picked him up all right, ma’am. One of the chaps at the Three Hogs was a constable. He trailed you, and we got him as he came out into Tombland from the cathedral-close. I’m going to charge him with being the chap on the island with those two lads that time. Our fellow says the other man addressed him as Mousehold. I suppose you can confirm that? Of course, he may not be the same fellow, but it’s funny. He swears he knows nothing about the whole business, and just undertook to deliver messages, that’s all. Would you like to come along in about an hour, ma’am? We’re giving him that time to cool off.”

Mrs. Bradley interviewed George, her chauffeur. He was to get in touch with Jonathan and request him to take the boat back to Stalham and wait for her there. George was to have the car ready immediately after lunch.

When she got to the police station, Mousehold had not been brought into the inspector’s office, but, besides the inspector himself and a constable, there was present Mrs. Bradley’s alert young friend, Detective Inspector Pirberry from Scotland Yard.

“Nothing at all at our end,” he said when he had greeted Mrs. Bradley. “We’ve traced the three women to Westminster. There seems no doubt that each in turn was taken on board a small, seagoing boat—probably a converted yawl or ketch—at the bottom of the steps leading down to the water, and was brought to Yarmouth and through it, and then murdered. It’s not a kidnapping case. The women appear to have joined these men of their own free will. It’s odd, though. These sort of women do get themselves murdered, of course. Cases come up fairly frequently. But the embellishments are most unusual. I hear that you think the bodies have been used as decoy ducks, to get certain waterways clear, mam? It’s an interesting theory, but, as I see it, it springs a leak over the fact that, even if the holiday-makers are apt to clear away at night from the places where the

bodies have been found, the police are equally apt to haunt such localities pretty closely.”

“Yes,” Mrs. Bradley agreed, “but only for a comparatively short time. And then, the police can’t be everywhere. Holiday-makers can—by sheer weight of numbers.”

“At any rate,” said Os, “Mrs. Bradley’s theory is the only one that makes sense out of the facts, so far. But until we know what’s going on, and *why* it’s necessary for these people to have holiday-makers cleared off the rivers, we can’t get very much further.”

“Well, let’s have this fellow in and see what he’s got to say now,” suggested Pirberry. But Mousehold remained firm that he had told everything he could, and looked extremely alarmed when the inspector informed him that he would be charged with the murder of the woman Rilitz, whose body had been found on the island near Marsham Broad through the agency of the two boys.

Even this news did not loosen his tongue. He denied that he was the Mousehold referred to, declared that in his case the nickname came from the fact that he kept a ferret, and declared that he could produce an alibi for the night in question. He was escorted back to the cells, still protesting his innocence.

“If his alibi is all right, I don’t know whether we can hold him,” Inspector Os observed. “What’s in a name, after all? Mousehold is a common enough word, as I’ve said to Mrs. Bradley before. It might be the nickname of a hundred men in the county, for all I know.”

“What about Huzy?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“Remanded for a week. That’s all right, because some of the stuff he had on him had certainly been pilfered. But he also swears he knows nothing about the murder of the old man. Says his sister had five bob for every viper she made, and he had the job of delivering them at the farm, and got five bob for his trouble. The worst of it is, I’ve a hunch, myself, that both these fellows are speaking the truth when they say they don’t know any more. If it *is* the truth, we’re sunk.”

“Doesn’t Huzy know where that quick-change gentleman went when he left the farm?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“No. Says he always went to the farm to deliver the vipers, and had delivered half a dozen before those girls caught him.”

“And yet,” said Mrs. Bradley, “Martha Huzy knows something more than that, or why did the viper, in my hands, act as a password into the Huzy’s house?”

“I could arrest Martha and charge her and her brother with being accessories after the fact,” said the inspector. “It’s unlikely that the old man was left for more than twenty-four hours in the middle of an open field without being spotted by somebody. The inference is that the body was moved after the murder, and replaced later.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Pirberry. “It’s quite possible that nobody went that way. Where did the footpath lead to?”

“One way, on to the road to Stalham; the other way, back on to Happisburgh Common. I can’t see it being deserted for twenty-four hours at this time of year, with all these people on holiday. It’s been the presence of all these holiday-makers, all the time, which has made the job so hard. We’ve tried to check up on boats, but at this time of year there are hundreds of craft in commission, and so many of them are made to pattern, and standardised, and so on, that when you’ve got a description of one you’ve got a description of a dozen or more, all the same length, tonnage, and sleeping capacity, and you don’t know where you are. I’ve got lists upon lists from the owners, and I’ve got lists of hirers, but, so far, it’s like trying to pick out one special leaf on a tree. I’ve checked and counterchecked, but the boat may not be listed for hire, even then, and it may not belong to a private yacht club, either. There doesn’t seem anywhere to begin.”

“I know,” said Pirberry, sympathetically. “It’s the very devil. And our end doesn’t help much. I’ve got descriptions of the fellows who may have decoyed these women, but the descriptions might apply to a million men. There’s nothing in them to give a lead. The same with the boat. The Port of London Authority have done all they can, but they can’t check up on every little motorboat that drops down-river and works out past Southend and up this coast.”

“It’s what Mrs. Bradley says,” said the Norwich inspector. “There’s something behind all this, and until we know what it is we shan’t get a line on anything. The only thing to do is to police the rivers as far as we possibly can, and stop up the possible bolt-holes on the coast, and wait for something to break. But just think what that means! There are dozens of miles of coast, and any number of little harbours, especially to the north and

down in Essex. A small boat could nip in and out again, and us not a ha'porth the wiser."

"You've got some idea of smuggling, I suppose?" said Pirberry. "Dope? Stolen diamonds? Must be something out of the ordinary to lead to four murders."

"The idea seems the only feasible one at present, but there's very little to go on. In fact, if Mrs. Bradley hadn't made this suggestion of them trying to clear a bit of water, I don't know that I'd have thought of it, even then. As it is, it may still turn out to be a killer, and that means a homicidal maniac, and you know what a dance those people can lead the police."

"Yes, you can't hit on one of the ordinary motives, and the murderer may seem as sane as anyone else, best part of the time."

"Had you considered the possibility," said Mrs. Bradley, "that something may be smuggled *out* of the country, instead of being smuggled in?"

"Could be," Pirberry answered. "Stolen property again, in that case. But we've no record of any particularly sensational robbery up to the present, and the fact that they've committed these murders would indicate that the other deed, whatever it is, is done. People won't stay off rivers and Broads for ever. That's assuming your idea is correct, and the point of the murders has been to clear the waterways."

"If it isn't already done, it will have to be done pretty soon. I am in agreement with you so far," said Mrs. Bradley.

"But why use the rivers, when the road would be so much quicker?" observed the inspector.

"For one of two reasons," said Mrs. Bradley. "Either because they want to be in a position to run the boat straight out to sea without having to risk being seen with their car at one of the small harbours, or, as I'm more inclined to think, because the stolen property is more easily carried by boat than in a car."

"But—I mean, they're not using a barge, or something of that sort, are they?" asked Pirberry, grinning. "I didn't know—"

"A wherry," said the inspector, looking at Mrs. Bradley. "A wherry is what we use on these waters, Mr. Pirberry, when there's a load to be shifted. But I can't imagine anything—"

"Oh, I can," said Mrs. Bradley. "I can imagine plenty of things."

"I should like to see a wherry-load of diamonds," said Os, with a grin.

“It won’t be diamonds, and it won’t be dope,” said Mrs. Bradley, eyeing them solemnly. “What’s the size of a wherry, Inspector?”

“Well, the ones used by holiday-makers, ma’am, can take ten passengers or anything from twenty to sixty tons of cargo. Sometimes the trading wherries are towed by tugs. They are about fifty-six feet long, with a beam of eleven feet, and have a very shallow draught, so that they can go anywhere on these rivers.”

“Well, Inspector, I suggest you pay special attention to your list of wherries, wherry-owners, recent hirers or purchasers, and keep them all, the boats and the men, under constant but unobtrusive observation. And then, we shall see.”

“Got an idea, Mrs. Bradley?” enquired Detective Inspector Pirberry, respectfully.

“A wild one,” Mrs. Bradley admitted, “and it depends, of course, upon the theory that the stolen property *must* be taken by water.”

“That means the weight,” said Pirberry. “Yes, I can see what you’re after there. But, unless they’re going to lift out a whole safe rather than try to crack it—and even that could be carried on a lorry—oh, but then, your point about transferring it to a boat at the coast. Still, why should they try to take it out of the country? I can’t see the idea in that.”

“But I don’t imagine it’s a safe,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I imagine it’s something which can only be transported bit by bit.”

“Sounds like Norwich Castle to me,” said Inspector Os, with a guffaw. Mrs. Bradley glanced at him sharply. Then a grin like that of an alligator spread itself across her countenance. The inspector returned her glance, and then looked at Pirberry.

“Got it, have you, mam?” said Pirberry.

“Well, I’ve got something,” said Mrs. Bradley, favouring him (to his mingled amazement and amusement) with the kind of wink which a Notre Dame gargoyle might be expected to employ, “but whether I’ve got it right is another matter. You know, Inspector,” she added, turning to Os again, “there is many a true word spoken in jest, we are told; but this word of yours is better than a true word; it is an illuminating word. I am not at all sure that it is not the very last word on the subject.”

The inspector’s expression had changed. He now looked thoroughly bewildered.

“But, really, ma’am, I was only joking,” he said. “Norwich Castle? Why—”

“Not Norwich Castle,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I want a reliable guidebook.”

“There’s this,” said Os, taking a book from the mantelpiece. Mrs. Bradley turned up the reference to Worstead. Both men came round to her side to look. “What’s Worstead got to do with it?”

“Our murderer has been at some pains to indicate that Worstead has much to do with it,” Mrs. Bradley replied. “What about the material of which the vipers are made?”

She took out of her pocket the viper with which she had been presented that morning, and dangled it by the neck.

“Worsted, called after Worstead, where the fabric used to be made by the Flemish weavers,” she observed. “And when I return from Worstead, I shall proceed to Horsey Mere, to plant this viper on the body I am promised will be there. No doubt you would like to be present. Let us meet at Stalham at seven this evening for dinner.”

Pirberry, who had put up at a small pub in Thorpe-next-Norwich, escorted her as far as her hotel. Their conversation, naturally, centred itself in the murders. Mrs. Bradley again mentioned the deck-chair she had impounded.

“I wish you’d have a look at it,” she said. “Privately, if possible. I don’t want to hurt the inspector’s feelings. I think the superintendent would aid and abet you.”

“You want to know about the fingerprints,” said Pirberry, nodding. “I’ll get Black to come along. He’s our expert.”

• CHAPTER 18 •

“For instance, there’s the arch I’ve got to go through next, walking about at the other end of the ground....”

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The main road out of Stalham to the west curved in a quarter-circle past the Roman camp and across the river. About three-quarters of a mile below the bridge it forked, one way going on south-westward towards Wroxham, the other cutting directly to the west before it shot suddenly north-west at the village of Smallburgh to the old market town of North Walsham. Long before North Walsham was reached, however, Mrs. Bradley and her nephew left the main road and took the turning to Worstead.

“We are going to look at the church,” she answered, when Jonathan enquired the object of their expedition.

Worstead itself proved to be a pleasant agricultural village with a handsome church, which gave the impression of being far too large for the place.

It was in the Decorated style of the Early Perpendicular architecture and proved to be well worth a visit. The rich tracery of the west door and window having been admired, and the “sound-holes”—some traceried openings in the belfry chamber of the tower—having been commented on by Jonathan, they went inside.

Jonathan wondered, during the next twenty minutes, what it was his aunt had come to see. Backed up by his wife, who had returned to the hotel in Norwich, he had insisted upon being allowed to accompany his aunt on the expedition, and he knew her well enough to realise that her arguments against his coming had sprung from the fact that she anticipated danger. She had also made Deborah promise to remain indoors at the hotel.

He had been surprised, too, when it turned out that she proposed to walk from Stalham into Worstead, and had left George and the car at the

inn. However, he asked no more questions, once he had been told that the object of the expedition was the church, but patiently accompanied her up the aisle of the great building and admired, with her, the interior furnishings.

When they were outside again, she said, "There ought to be something here to guide us, but I haven't seen anything yet. If, on our walk back, you should see anything even remotely resembling a serpent, please draw my attention to it."

She spoke solemnly, and Jonathan grinned. When they came to the post-office she went inside, and he remained without, idly watching the street. The only thing even remotely resembling a serpent was a coil of gardener's hose-piping, which was being carried out of a nearby house by a boy.

Upon Mrs. Bradley's reappearance, he mentioned this fact.

"Hose-piping?" said Mrs. Bradley. "That ought to start a train of thought, but it doesn't. The weavers," she added inconsequently, "settled here in the reign of King Henry the First, and later moved south to Norwich."

"Is that what *you're* going to do?" asked Jonathan, looking at her suspiciously. "Why don't you tell me exactly why we've come here? What did you hope to find?"

"A Worstead viper," Mrs. Bradley replied. He could not decide whether she was laughing or serious, and her beaky little mouth and sharp black eyes gave him no clue. He stopped to light his pipe, and she went walking on, but suddenly she halted and turned round, apparently to speak to him. At the same instant there was the slight sound of a window being opened, and, following it, the faintest disturbance of the dust at the side of the road.

"The viper," said Mrs. Bradley to Jonathan. "It might be important. I think I had better pick it up."

Just as she stepped into the street, a car, her own car, drove up, with George at the wheel. She bent and scuffled her fingers in the light dust.

"Did you get what you wanted?" Jonathan enquired, as they entered the car and George drove off.

"Yes, I think so." She displayed a tiny dart. "Poison from the viper's fangs, I fancy. Didn't you hear the window being opened?"

"Yes, now that you mention it. But I didn't connect it..."

“Oh, I did, but possibly a fraction of a second too late if you had not stopped.”

“Wanted to light my pipe.”

“Thank you very much. I have been keeping careful watch ever since we have been in the village, and have been wondering exactly what form the attack would take. I did not think of poison, the only logical idea.”

“Did you get the number of the house?”

“I know which it was. The man will have made his escape by now, I should think. I can tell the inspector the story of our narrow escape, but I doubt whether that will do much good. It was a house up for sale, as I suppose you noticed. The man made his escape from the back, I have no doubt, as soon as he had blown the dart at me.”

“We could get the inspector to find out whether a stranger has been seen in the village.”

“With all these holiday-makers about?” She laughed, and suddenly added, “I shall give the dart to Detective Inspector Pirberry for his collection.”

“Just as well George turned up,” said Jonathan, not perceiving that the last sentence warranted explanation.

“I shall reprove him. His orders were clear.”

“He’s a good old knight-errant, isn’t he?”

“That is not the reason for his being in my service.” She spoke tartly, as though, for once, her faithful chauffeur had annoyed her.

“I suppose he could hardly argue the point verbally. Don’t forget that I, too, had orders to stay in Norwich with my wife.”

“Yes, well, it’s hardly fair on Deborah for you to rush off to places where people blow poisoned darts. Curare is deadly, child.”

“That’s as may be. What’s our next move, anyway? By the way, did you telephone Deb from that post-office?”

“Yes, and also Inspector Os, but he was at Stalham, the sergeant said, putting Martha Huzy through a catechism. ‘And nobody by, including Mr. Pirberry, to see fair play,’ the sergeant added,” she concluded, with a hoot of laughter.

“They do all hate him in Norwich, don’t they?” Jonathan observed.

“Yes. I suppose it is natural. Mr. Pirberry is touring the places where the women’s bodies were found. I don’t know what he hopes or expects to

find. At seven tonight we are dining, and then I am taking the viper to Horsey Mere.”

“But you won’t still do that, will you?”

“Unless anything better offers.”

“But, according to the reactions of the blow-pipe expert this afternoon, they’ve tumbled to it that they’d be better off if their stooge hadn’t passed you the viper. If you go to Horsey Mere tonight with the thing, you’ll find they’ve altered the rendezvous.”

“I say I shall go unless anything better offers.”

Jonathan wondered, a little later, what was her definition, under the circumstances, of the word “better,” for the first news they received when, upon getting out of the car, Mrs. Bradley began to chide George gently for having disobeyed orders, was that a fifth body had been found, and that a worsted viper had been thrust into the wound.

“The inspector telephoned the hotel at Stalham, madam, at two,” concluded George, respectfully, “and asked whether you had visited Worstead and were back. I said that you were not, but that, as the news was urgent, I would expedite your return with the car.”

When the inspector heard Mrs. Bradley’s story, he withheld his own until after he had been to Worstead, accompanied by her, her nephew, and three constables, to search the house from which the dart had been blown.

This expedition, needless to say, was fruitless, so they all returned to Stalham, as “the dinner was still on,” as Jonathan put it, and Mrs. Bradley gave the police officer a meticulously exact description of the boy with the hose-piping.

Then she said, “Perhaps, directly after dinner, Inspector Os will tell his story of the discovery of the fifth body. But whatever it turns out to be, I go to the trysting-place. I have accepted responsibility for this viper,” she added, taking it out of her skirt pocket and scrutinising it closely, “and I must plant it where it will blossom.”

The inspector told the story after dinner, for which Pirberry had joined them, and it lasted until Mrs. Bradley was ready to go on her journey. Indeed, she began to be afraid that it was going to last too long, and that it would be dawn by the time she got to Horsey Mere, for the dinner was good, the wine passable, and the old brandy beyond praise. The men sat on, talking, until after half-past nine, so that it was not until a quarter to ten that the inspector, to a fascinated audience, was able to commence his narrative.

It concerned some people called Copley, and was, in some respects, the oddest tale of the series.

“Where exactly was this fifth corpse found?” asked Mrs. Bradley, bringing out her map.

• CHAPTER 19 •

“You promised to tell me your history, you know,” said Alice, “and why it is you hate —C and D.”

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Edgar Copley and his sister Romance had decided upon a holiday on the Broads because it formed a sort of halfway house between two opinions. Edgar, who was fond of yachting, would have liked to take an auxiliary yacht round the coast from Southampton to Yarmouth. Romance, however, needed, the doctor said, a quiet country holiday, not necessarily at the seaside. A holiday on the Broads, so that Edgar could sail a boat and Romance find peace and quiet, seemed the best solution.

It may seem odd that, as the brother and sister could not agree upon holidays, they did not go their own ways and meet at the end of the fortnight to exchange experiences; but the difficulty was that Romance was what the neighbours called “not quite normal,” and it was Edgar’s custom to have her with him to see that she did not get herself into trouble. It was a poor life for a man of thirty-five, but he had shouldered the burden of it and of his sister’s maintenance for the past eleven years.

He would have liked to marry; had, in fact, at the age of twenty-three, become engaged; but he would not inflict his sister upon the girl, and so had broken off the engagement. For the first five years after the death of his father, who had survived his mother by some years, Edgar had hoped that Romance might die; but she did not. She lived on, pallid, large-faced, fleshy, resentful, and childish, until sometimes he wished that he himself could die, if only to be rid of her.

He brought her to Potter Heigham by train, and they boarded the yacht there and sailed her, day after day, Romance in a kind of safety-harness which Edgar had invented and made for her, seated in the well quite close to

him, and Edgar sailing the boat and experiencing comparative pleasure in doing so.

At nights they moored well away from other craft, so that the serious nightmares from which Romance suffered should not disturb other people, and a fortnight and more passed comparatively peacefully for the harassed and hagridden brother, and even the puffy-faced defective began to look the better for the change.

The yacht was roomy for two people, for she was designed to sleep four. Her name was *Medea*, and she was a sloop-rigged carvel-built witch, twenty-eight feet long, eight and a half in beam, and drew just under three feet of water. She was easy to handle, had a fair turn of speed, and as the headroom in her saloon was five feet ten inches there was no need to worry about the five-foot three Romance knocking her ungainly head, although Edgar (said Inspector Os, speaking almost with relish) sometimes wished that she would knock it off.

Edgar had given her the saloon for sleeping. He himself had a berth in the fore-cabin. Custom had made it possible for him to disregard her unearthly moans and shouts when she was having nightmares, and although he half-woke, always, when she had these attacks, he had learnt that there was nothing he could do for them or for her, and so was in the habit of turning over and going to sleep again when the paroxysms (always, fortunately, of very short duration) were exhausted, and his sister was again in her heavy sleep.

When they came to a suitable place for bathing, Edgar, making certain that his sister was securely fastened by her harness to the locker in the well, would have a swim. Fortunately, she quite enjoyed to watch him whilst he swam, and, to amuse her, he was good-natured enough to gambol in the water, duck-diving, canoeing, threshing, and splashing until the defective screamed with amusement, invariably demanded more of the entertainment, and was inclined to turn sulky when he came out. Her moods, however, lasted no longer (so far as he could tell) than those of a three-year-old child.

Sometimes, when the margin was firm and sandy, he would allow her to paddle, but he dreaded giving her this pleasure, for the business of getting her feet dry and her shoes and stockings on again was an exhausting one, and one which he did not always feel equal to tackling.

Edgar and Romance had begun their cruise almost a fortnight before the Bank Holiday. On the Wednesday following Bank Holiday Monday they

had sailed from their night moorings not far from Thurne Mouth, and had gone upstream under the Potter Heigham road and railway bridges into Heigham Sound, a fairly large Broad leading into the much larger Hickling Broad. On Hickling Broad they had spent the rest of the day, and also the following morning until after lunch.

Then Edgar thought he would try Horsey Mere, which was new to both of them, and accordingly took the yacht along Meadow Dyke. This was a stream about a mile long, which connected the northern end of Heigham Sound with the south-western corner of Horsey Mere. A short distance away, across the sand dunes, was the coast, and it occurred to Edgar that it would be a pleasant change, especially for his sister, to spend a couple of hours beside the sea.

They left the yacht near the woods on the eastward side of Horsey Mere, and found a road, which led to the dead village of Horsey. They turned north through the village, following the map, to Horsey Corner, and there found a road and then a track, both leading seawards.

It was when they were on the sand dunes that Edgar discovered he had left both pipe and tobacco behind. He glanced at his sister, who was singing to herself, happily engaged in pouring sand over her head, and decided that it would be reasonable to leave her where she was and return to the yacht. It was about a mile and a half by the way they had come, and he thought he could be there and back, if he hurried, in less than three-quarters of an hour.

Bidding Romance to stay where she was, and promising to bring her the sweets which had also been left behind, Edgar gave her some picture-papers to look at and helped her to make a very large hole in the sand before he hastened away.

He was an active man, and made short work of the distance. He found pipe, tobacco, and the sweets quite easily, and, coming ashore again, returned to the drowned village and the road which led to the coast.

Of his sister there was no sign. He accosted a couple of holiday-makers who were walking on the dunes, to ask for news of her, but they said that they had seen no one walking alone, and that the only people who had passed them had been a family with a baby in a canvas sling seat, which the parents were carrying.

Edgar continued to search, and, failing to find his sister, went back to the place where he had left her. The hole which they had commenced to dig was no deeper, he thought, than when he had departed. The soft sand took

no traceable impressions, and although there were tracks on the firmer sand near the water, they were confused, and none led direct to the water's edge.

His chief difficulty was to decide in which direction to search, for the defective might have taken either way along the coast. Since, however, he had been told by the hikers that they had seen no one answering to the description he gave of his sister, he decided to walk in the direction for which they had been heading.

Nearly three hours passed. He was extremely fatigued and very hungry, having long ago eaten the sweets he had brought with him. There was always the chance that she had turned inland again, and not far away were little streams into which she might have fallen, although he doubted whether they were deep.

In the end there seemed nothing for it but to communicate with the police, and he returned to the yacht with the intention of sailing her back to Potter Heigham. He had left the yacht the first time, in company with his sister, at a quarter to two. It had been nearly three when he discovered that he would have to go back for his pipe, for Romance walked slowly. He had got back to the dunes by a quarter to four, and it was about eight o'clock by the time he reached the yacht again.

Here was another misfortune. He had reefed the sails before leaving, and when he came to set them again he made the discovery that the mast had been sawn almost through about five feet from the bottom. It came down as the mainsail went up, and there he was, with a stranded yacht and no very direct way by road back to Potter Heigham.

He had to get there, however, so he rowed the dinghy all the way, having left her mast and sail at the owners' yard, as he had not thought it necessary to take them, thinking they would be in the way. It was over four miles to row and another mile to walk to the village. It was also getting dark. He made his report to the police, and then, being utterly exhausted, slept in the village that night, and returned to the yacht, having obtained the dinghy's mast and sail from the owners. He had reported upon the damage to the yacht's mainmast and had listened gloomily to the estimate of expenses.

He found his sister on board the *Medea* when he got back, but she was dead. Her throat had been cut, she was sprawled in the well of the yacht with her head hanging over the side, and she presented a most horrible spectacle.

“He says he fainted, ma’am, when he saw her,” concluded the inspector.

“No wonder,” said Mrs. Bradley. “At what time does the doctor think she died?”

“He puts it at between three and four o’clock in the afternoon, ma’am, the time when, according to this chap’s story, he left her to go back for his pipe.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bradley, meditatively. “Sounds bad, on the face of it, doesn’t it?”

“You’re telling me, ma’am. It certainly does. And if it wasn’t for the viper...”

“Oh, there was a viper, was there?”

“Yes, put on her neck in the wound, ma’am, just like the others. Otherwise, as I was saying, we should wonder what he’d been up to. The girl was a complete burden on him financially, and he had to look after her, and all that, and the motive sticks out a mile. Still, as things are, and have been, about the other deaths...”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Bradley, still very thoughtfully. “It’s a good thing for him that the vipers have never been allowed to get into the papers, isn’t it? I’m more anxious than ever, Inspector, to get to Horsey Mere. Is the yacht still there?”

“Oh, yes. She can’t be moved, for one thing, unless she’s towed, but we want her for further investigation, anyway, and, of course, we’re sticking to the brother, as the thing looks suspicious against him.”

“I should like to meet him,” said Mrs. Bradley cordially.

“You realise one damning thing, ma’am?”

“Several damning things, as a matter of fact, Inspector.”

“This in particular, ma’am. Him and his sister have been on the Broads three weeks.”

“Yes. You made that clear.”

“What’s clear to me, ma’am, is that those three weeks will cover the time of all these deaths.”

“How very convenient,” said Mrs. Bradley, nodding. “Yes, that is certainly damning.” She nodded again, and glanced at him with simple admiration.

• CHAPTER 20 •

“Here, you may nurse it a bit if you like!” said the Duchess to Alice,
flinging the baby at her as she spoke.

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The police launch, proceeding under cover of the darkness and showing the three necessary lights, made short work of the trip from Stalham to Horsey Mere. At the wheel was the sergeant, a man born and bred in the district. Mrs. Bradley, Os, Pirberry, and Jonathan sat two on each side in the stern-sheets aft of the smelly little engine. The launch was an open boat sixteen feet long and capable of nearly ten knots.

The sergeant, who had the exact position of the yacht, for he had visited it in company with the inspector earlier in the day and had helped to superintend the removal of the body, drew up the police launch, and the party went aboard *Medea*.

“Now, ma’am,” said the inspector, “this is about your rendezvous, I take it. If anybody should be about, and on the lookout for you, they are sure to have seen our lights and heard our engine. So it’s up to you. We’re here on the spot if you want us, but, in my opinion, you’re doing a foolish thing in going ashore tonight.”

“So foolish,” said Mrs. Bradley, “that I’m not going to do it, after all. With your permission, I shall remain on the yacht, prepared to receive all comers, and you, I hope, will meet me again in the morning.”

Os bluntly observed that he preferred his bed when he could get it, but said that no doubt the sergeant would keep them company. He added that he would be over again in the morning, with a couple of men, to make another search of the sand-dunes. There must be something. Miss Copley must have left some trace, he averred.

When he had gone, the two men, Jonathan and Pirberry, lay on the bunks in the fore-cabin, the sergeant had a cot in the bows, and Mrs.

Bradley, who had no squeamishness about occupying the place recently vacated by the murdered woman, took the port-side berth in the saloon. The corpse had been laid in the well, so the associations of the saloon were, in any case, with the living and not the dead.

She did not sleep, having no intention of doing so. She lay, wide awake in the darkness, listening to the night sounds of woods and the water, and thinking over the story she had heard. Beside her lay the worsted viper, that omen and potent of evil. She guessed what was coming, and was quite prepared for it.

Hours passed. She was not at all sleepy, for her profession, that of medicine, had accustomed her, early in life, to remain awake all night if necessary, and the fact that she was lying down in comparative comfort did not prejudice the exercising of this ability.

She heard the murderers come aboard at three. They were wonderfully silent, and so cautious in the boarding of the *Medea* that the yacht scarcely seemed to acknowledge their presence. One person on board, however, was either as wide awake as Mrs. Bradley, or else was sensitive in sleep to the slightest extraordinary occurrence, for, just as she had pushed the viper under the pillow, swung her feet to the ground, cocked her small revolver and got her thumb on the switch of her powerful electric torch, Pirberry fell off his bunk and then gave a loud exclamation of annoyance at having so warned the intruders. This woke Jonathan, who switched on a torch and demanded to know what was up. The sergeant slept on through it all.

There was a hasty scramble of the enemy over the side. Apparently they had come in a rowing boat, for there was no sound of an engine, and the *Medea* rocked coquettishly from the shove with which the intruders pushed off from her side.

"A pity," said Mrs. Bradley, lighting the lamp in the saloon and confronting two owlish cavaliers with her mirthless and basilisk grin. "But rather a nice touch to get me to bring the viper here for myself."

"How many?" demanded Pirberry.

"Two, I think, not more. And here we are, helpless to catch them."

"I don't know so much about helpless," said Jonathan. "Isn't there a dinghy? It's beginning to get light. Come on."

"Too late," said Pirberry. "They've got a start, and it's dark. We should never find them. And we'd best not divide our forces. What do you say, mam?"

"I agree," said Mrs. Bradley. "By the way—you remember the deck-chair? Has it been returned to *Calpurnia*?"

"It has, mam. And thereby hangs a very peculiar circumstance." He paused impressively. "Mam, there was not a print of any kind whatever upon that chair. Not of any kind, by the time I saw it. What do you say to that?"

"That we are wise not to go off on wild-goose chases in the dark," said Mrs. Bradley.

So the yacht's party remained where they were, and by eight o'clock the inspector was back with two men, who, what was more, had brought some food with them and a couple of thermos flasks of coffee.

"And now for the beach," said Mrs. Bradley, when the overnight adventure had been described.

"Didn't you catch a glimpse of them at all?" enquired the inspector. "Why, one of the reasons for Mrs. Bradley's coming, after they gave her that viper, was to act as a sort of decoy duck to the gang. They'd be sure to smell a rat, she said, as soon as we picked up their messenger. Besides, this man Bleriot knows her, and if he's one of the gang...."

Mrs. Bradley, unused to being referred to as "a sort of decoy duck," grinned mirthlessly.

"And now for the sand-dunes," she said, amending her first description of the shore. "I am anxious to see the spot at which Edgar Copley is supposed to have left his sister."

"If it weren't for the viper..." said the inspector again.

"I agree," said Pirberry. "But, in any case, we've got to have proof. So far, there's nothing to show that Edgar Copley *didn't* go back for his pipe and tobacco, just as he said he did. It's as reasonable to suppose that he was telling the truth as that he was lying, on the face of the story as it stands. That's what we've got to keep in mind. There's nothing basically impossible or even particularly unusual in what he did. Of course, you can argue he ought not to have left a mental of his sister's type on the shore alone, in case she got into the water and drowned herself; but, in actual practice, these loonies are as sensible in essential things as any of us, and the probabilities are that she wouldn't stir very far from where he left her. There's a type of defective person who has no initiative whatsoever—not even so much as a six-months-old baby, which will, at least, do a bit of

crawling around. I don't see why, on the face of it, we shouldn't begin by believing Edgar Copley and then we can see where that gets us."

This laudable suggestion was carried out scrupulously by the party. They took the road to the village, which, inundated by floods a few years previously, still presented, with its dead trees and rusty appearance, a sorry spectacle on what should have been good farmland, and then turned on to the sand-dunes.

These formed a couple of ridges between the land and the sea, and, except on such comparatively rare occasions as the times of tremendous floods, were as arid and dry as a desert.

Guided by Edgar Copley's exact descriptions, and also by the line of the road by which the Copleys were supposed to have approached the coast at this point, Mrs. Bradley found very little difficulty in discovering the place where Romance Copley had been left to make her sand-hole. The inspector, of course, knew where it was, for, he said, Copley himself had guided him to the spot on the previous day. The hole was a circular dip about nine feet across, and was surrounded on every side, except for about a yard which faced the sea, by tall, coarse, spiky grass. Anyone lying down in the hole, or even squatting in it, was invisible from a distance of twenty yards, for the party took it in turn to test this point.

"They decided to make it big enough," commented Pirberry. "Big enough for both to lounge in, I suppose, when Edgar came back with his baccy."

Mrs. Bradley began to cast about, and, watched by the inspector (a trifle sardonically, she supposed, since he and his men had searched the shore for several hours on the previous day), she walked down to the edge of the water.

"Afraid you won't find any trace of a boat having put in here," he said, when she returned. "The tide's been in and out since the murder, you know."

Mrs. Bradley grinned, and said that she did know, and had made allowance for the possibly criminal manoeuvres of the tide. Then she sat down in the hole and spread out her map.

"I suppose it is perfectly certain that this is the place they came to?" she observed, without looking up. "Is there anybody who can swear to having seen them approach the shore *before* Edgar went back for his pipe? —You see," she added, "it seems odd to me that Edgar left the woman

alone, knowing that he could scarcely expect to rejoin her in less than three-quarters of an hour. According to what he has indicated, she had the brain of a three-year-old child. Now I, personally, would not dream of leaving a three-year-old child to play alone on a lonely shore within easy reach of the water. According, again, to his evidence, Romance Copley loved paddling. There was nothing to prevent her, so far as I can see, from wading in, shoes and all, if she felt inclined."

"But she wasn't drowned: her throat was cut," said Pirberry, mystified by this excursion into what seemed to him the redundant and the unnecessary.

"I think Mrs. Bradley means to point out that, if Edgar did leave her, he didn't much care what happened to her—or, to go even farther, rather hoped that she might get drowned—or else, he didn't leave her at all," put in Inspector Os, before Mrs. Bradley could speak. "If he didn't leave her, presumably he was the fellow who cut her throat, and his story about the pipe and tobacco is a lie, intended to give him an alibi for the time of the murder. It's a bit odd, you know, that she was murdered during that one period when, according to his own showing, he had left her by herself. After all, this doesn't really fit with the other murders, in which the women were decoyed. They couldn't have got a woman of this type very far in the time before they cut her throat."

"Then you both believe Copley's guilty?" said Pirberry, who, apparently did not. "But, if you do, how do you account for the viper?"

"Planted," said Os. "Mrs. Bradley has never thought that the murderers planted the vipers. Her theory, if I have understood it, is that the murderers have been followed up by somebody—probably, it seems, by this Amos Bleriot—who knew them and was at enmity with them, and put a trademark, as it were, on their work."

"But, in that case," said Mrs. Bradley, not denying the theory attributed to her, "how could this man—call him Amos Bleriot if you like—have known of the murder of Romance, unless it had been planned by the murderers of the other three women and the farmer?—How are you getting on with that particular investigation, by the way?"

"Slow, but sure," said Os. "In fact, after today, I'm going on with it as a separate item. The Chief Constable's orders. He thinks it's the most likely field of enquiry. Says we shall make nothing of the other murders except

from the London end. That means Mr. Pirberry.” He glanced at Pirberry and smiled.

“What does *he* make of the vipers?” asked Mrs. Bradley.

“The Chief Constable?” Os shrugged his heavy shoulders. “Says they’re the work of a maniac, and a maniac is what we’ve got to find. Says somebody must know something more about poor old Elias Bennett than we’ve been told. And, of course, there was no viper on his body, ma’am, as we keep on saying. My view, the C.C. may be right, and it’s quite a separate affair.”

“But it is connected with Martha Huzy, and she is the maker of the vipers which her brother was supplying to this man on the marshes. All the same, I think it is an excellent idea, at this stage of the enquiry, to treat the death of the farmer as something apart from the other murders. The only thing is that—it isn’t something apart,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“Copley is from London,” said Pirberry. “Matters are already in train at that end. We ought to know quite a lot more about Mr. Copley and his sister before long. Meanwhile...”

“Meanwhile,” said Mrs. Bradley, “we ought to be able to find out exactly where she was murdered. It couldn’t have been so very far from here. Even supposing she was carried off in a car, she would have had to be transported to the car. It could scarcely have been driven on to these dunes.”

The inspector continued the search, but Mrs. Bradley, taking from her capacious skirt pocket the trowel she had brought with her for the purpose, began to dig in the hole.

“What are you looking for—bloodstains?” enquired Pirberry, joining her at the end of twenty minutes.

“I was wondering what had become of the picture papers which Edgar said he left with his sister,” Mrs. Bradley replied. She went on patiently with her excavations, burrowing and digging away with the assiduous application of a terrier which has buried a bone.

“But you don’t expect to find them buried under the sand?”

“Blessed is he that expects nothing,” Mrs. Bradley sententiously replied. “History repeats itself,” she added. “Remember the case of Norman Thorne, who not only buried the body, but pointed out to the police the chicken-run under which he had hidden it.”

As she spoke she took out a bunch of withered sea-grass crushed and dark-coloured.

“What’s that doing there?” enquired Pirberry, interested. “Hm! Wiped his hands on it! Is that what you were looking for?”

“And the picture papers,” Mrs. Bradley insisted. She continued her excavations, but, at a depth of four feet or so, nothing more had come to light except a thick mess of blood-soaked sand. Pirberry took a sample. Mrs. Bradley looked at her watch. “Of course, we don’t know quite how much time he had, but probably not more than I have used. The papers must be somewhere else,” she said. She glanced, as though accusingly, at the sea. Pirberry placed the sea-grass in another case he had brought, and remarked that Os had already advertised for the hikers to whom Copley claimed to have spoken when he had been searching for his sister.

“Lot of stuff to be got from the London end before we can do much more here,” continued Pirberry, again voicing his main interest in the matter. “I’ll get news soon, I hope, of whether a man answering to the description of Copley can be traced to those women who were decoyed.”

“If we could put Copley and this Amos Bleriot together over that business I should say the case is in the bag,” observed Os, who had heard the last remark. “I don’t care for the look of all this blood.”

“What, then, do you suppose, is the motive for the murders, beyond the fact that Copley must sometimes have longed to be rid of his sister?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“I’d say he intended, with Bleriot’s help, to make a screen for himself. Much easier to get rid of his sister safely if he could make us believe that a maniac was at work in the district.”

Mrs. Bradley nodded solemnly, but not in agreement with this argument.

“He would have chosen local people in that case, surely,” said Pirberry. “That’s the snag, it seems to me; this business of transporting the women from London.”

“Well, I don’t know. He was an experienced yachtsman, I imagine. Didn’t he tell us that he wanted to bring a yacht round the coast to Yarmouth from the Thames?” said Mr. Os. “And being a Londoner, you see —”

“A bad slip, if he really did murder those three women,” said Mrs. Bradley. “To me, the whole thing is too elaborate a framework within which to plan the murder of one poor mental defective. I still think there is something more behind all we have learned. I still think we should keep a

check on all wherries. One other point occurs to me. Do you not think, Mr. Os, that the motive of the murderers was not only to clear these waters at night, but also that it may have been to distract attention from another part of the county?"

She seated herself on the sand about seven yards from the hole, and spread out the map.

"Another part of the county?" said Pirberry. He seated himself beside her. "You don't mean—Sandringham?"

"No, I don't mean Sandringham. If I had to make an inspired guess, I should suggest Little Walsingham."

"Little Walsingham? But there's nothing at Little Walsingham!"

"Except a few ruins," said Mr. Os, grinning. "There used to be an abbey there. Not much left standing now, and what there is is mostly on private property."

"It used to be a place of pilgrimage," said Mrs. Bradley. "The legend is that the home of the Virgin was transported there; that the shrine was erected by angels; that it was covered with jewels..."

"Jewels?" said Pirberry, as though the word itself was a jewel picked out of a large dump of rubbish.

"Yes. The buildings were wrecked, of course, at the Dissolution, but, among other remains, the east wall, with its window, still stands, and the ruins can be seen by visitors on certain weekdays, I believe."

"What happened to the jewels? Went with all the rest of the loot, I suppose?" said Pirberry, pursuing what was to him the whole point of the discourse.

"I don't know what happened to the jewels, but I've no doubt they were not overlooked by the Commissioners," Mrs. Bradley replied. "I think, when we have finished here, we might do worse than go to Little Walsingham, Inspector."

"Just as you please, ma'am. But I can't see why..."

"Can't you? Do you remember the case of a man named Bone, who was arrested for the murder of a prostitute, one Minnie Baum, about three years ago, in London?"

"I—yes, of course, I do," said the inspector, staring.

"There's not," said Pirberry, intervening, "there's not necessarily any connection, mam, you know. I mean, granted the three bodies found by the local police"—he made a graceful gesture towards the inspector—"were

actually those of three women of the profession you mention, there is nothing to show..."

"No," said Mrs. Bradley, "but I suggest that you look up details of the murder of Minnie Baum before you go further into this case. You may find startling parallels. Has Mr. Os not told you that two, at any rate, of these women were connected with what may be a Satanist club?"

"But what's all this about Little Walsingham, ma'am?" demanded Inspector Os. "You're not suggesting they're going to pinch the ruins?"

"Yes, I am, Inspector. I am suggesting exactly that. And it seems to me that it will be attempted soon. If the east end of Walsingham Priory is to remain where it is, I should say we have no time to lose. If Detective Inspector Pirberry will look up the Bone case..."

"All right, I will," said Pirberry. "Not that I can see how it will help us, but I have enough experience of your methods, mam, to know that you mean what you say, and that you're likely to be right. But what's the idea? Are there still any jewels among the ruins?"

"No," replied Mrs. Bradley. "The only jewel is the fact that, apart from Glastonbury, the ruins at Little Walsingham are the most sacred in England. If you will look up the Bone case, I think you'll soon see what may be happening. Could you get at the records right away? I should be interested to look at them myself."

"I'll get them sent up from London. Meanwhile..."

"I still don't see how this affects Edgar Copley," said Os, frowning, "but no doubt it will all work out."

"Oh, yes, it will all work out," said Mrs. Bradley. "And I want to see Edgar Copley. And I want to know all about his life in London. And I want to know whether he knew Bone."

"But Bone is dead," said Os, again staring at her. "He died a year ago at Broadmoor. It's his case Mr. Pirberry is going to look up, isn't it?"

"One Bone is dead," Mrs. Bradley answered. "In fact, two Bones are dead. But it seems that their mantle fell upon a third, who is very much alive. At any rate, it does no harm to think so."

Both men stared at her this time. She grinned, and told them about the anonymous letters.

"From Norwich, ma'am?" said Os. "I wonder if the superintendent knows?"

• CHAPTER 21 •

“...she tried the little golden key in her desk, and to her great delight it fitted!”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

Pirberry telegraphed to London for the records of the murder of Minnie Baum, and they were sent by special messenger. He waited in Norwich for them, whilst Inspector Os and Mrs. Bradley journeyed by car to Little Walsingham. Jonathan and Deborah accompanied them.

The self-conscious but pretty little town was still a place of pilgrimage, chiefly for holiday-makers who came to visit the locality of the once-famous and sacred abbey, rather than for the devout, although there were a good many of these, too, Catholics mostly, who visited the Catholic church which held a copy of the shrine.

The abbey ruins were on private ground amid beautiful surroundings of green turf and pleasant groups of trees. The east end engaged Mrs. Bradley's attention. At the top could still be seen the slope taken by the roof. Two small round turrets, one on either side of the angle formed by the roof, were above the early English angle-buttresses. Below the turrets, and still in the angle of the roof, was a small round window, its tracery still to be seen; and below this again was the magnificent, long arch of the east window itself, with niches for statues on either side of the buttresses. The effect of the grey stone against the summer green of the turf and the grove of spreading trees was very striking, and it was a feeling far removed from the interest of the chase that Mrs. Bradley stood and regarded the scene.

Beyond the ruins stretched a fine and open park. The sky was faintly blue and very clear. A slight wind stirred in the leaves, and the shadows cast on the ground served only to enhance the quiet loveliness of the day.

The inspector sighed deeply as he turned to her.

“How many centuries, ma'am, has that stood here?”

“Six, at least, inspector. The first chapel was built in the twelfth century. This building came later, of course.”

“And held the shrine with all those jewels, ma’am?”

“Yes, with all those jewels. Also a joint of Saint Peter’s finger and a crystal flask containing the Virgin’s milk.”

The inspector wagged his head with agnostic doubt.

“Funny, the old things they believed, ma’am, isn’t it? Yet happier in their beliefs than you and me, we might say. One thing I discovered in the town—the people that own the big house here, and consequently these ruins, went on their holidays this morning. It appears that if you’re right, and these ruins are to be pinched—although why anybody but a crazy lunatic—still, that’s neither here nor there for the moment—*if* you’re right, I say, the attempt will be made pretty soon.”

“Yes,” agreed Mrs. Bradley. “The stars, it would seem, are in conjunction. With the waterways clear and the owners away from their property, the way would appear to be open. I wonder how long they’ve allowed themselves for the task, and how many workmen they’ve got? It’s a highly skilled business to demolish a structure in such a way that it can be set up again elsewhere. I suppose their idea is to sell it in America, although —”

She stepped back a dozen yards, and looked at the east end again.

“I should have thought it was the spot that was sacred, not so much the stones, ma’am,” the inspector suggested, walking back with her and following her gaze.

“Still, a consecrated building, you know,” Mrs. Bradley observed. “Satanists do not necessarily require such a building for their practices, but—you have heard, perhaps, of the Hell-Fire Club?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes, ma’am. But that flourished long enough ago.”

“So it did. But it has plenty of descendants. People sick in mind and soul—if you believe in soul—still carry on those same demoniac practices, believing firmly in them. The rites are childish, and to some minds disgusting, but the sincere among the practitioners—and there are more of them than you might think—are as convinced of the rightness of their performances as are the pious faithful convinced of the rightness of Christian worship. People are very odd,” she added tolerantly.

“Murder isn’t exactly odd, ma’am,” remarked the inspector. “It’s against the law, that’s what it is.”

“And rightly so,” agreed Mrs. Bradley. “Think of the social consequences if it were not.” She cackled harshly, and, to the inspector’s mind, unnecessarily. “And now,” she said, “for Detective Inspector Pirberry’s revelations.”

“I doubt whether much will come of those, ma’am,” the inspector observed. “I remember the case pretty well. I can’t say there seemed much in it. It didn’t compare with Ronald True.”

“Why should it?” Mrs. Bradley enquired.

“Well—the criminal lunacy, ma’am.”

“Oh, that, of course. I thought you meant the details. My son was Counsel for the Prosecution. He didn’t think Bone was insane. But, of course, he isn’t qualified to judge.”

“So you know all about the case, ma’am?”

“Very far from it, Inspector. I was extremely busy at the time, and my only connection with the case was to give my son, and incidentally the police, some small pieces of information. As I told you, I received two interesting anonymous letters—how interesting I have only lately begun to realise—but otherwise my mind is guiltless of any real knowledge of Bone the murderer, and certainly of the details of the trial. I hope and expect to be shocked and thrilled by Mr. Pirberry’s recital.”

The inspector regarded her doubtfully, reflecting, probably, that it is not the mission in life of Detective Inspectors of the Criminal Investigation Department to shock or thrill. She turned her back on the ruins and began to walk away, but suddenly changed her mind and walked towards them. To her amusement, about a dozen sightseers followed her example.

She gazed, however, no longer up at the walls, but down at the turf. She even went down on her knees (with what the inspector thought was a gracious but not wholly necessary gesture of respect for consecrated ground). Her object, however, was not to behave in a manner calculated to indicate piety; she wished merely to ascertain that the ground had been put to no unholy uses by celebrants of the Black Mass.

It was innocent, so far as she could determine, of magic circles and vile pentagrams, of runes and stars and all the paraphernalia of the devil-worshippers. She rose from her knees, waited upon respectfully by the inspector and eyed curiously by other spectators, and this time she really

did walk away from the ruins and under an arched gateway back to the high street of the town. Jonathan and Deborah, whose interest in the ruins had waned more rapidly, followed thankfully.

“I wonder?” she said aloud.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“That house in Worstead, or that farmhouse on the marshes, or both?”

“Both what, ma’am?”

“Headquarters and tabernacle, as it were, of the Satanists. And who, I wonder, is their priest? And where, oh, where, do they procure—no, that has a technical connotation in the circumstances—”

She broke off. The inspector, looking befogged, waited for her to continue. She did continue, but along what seemed to him entirely different lines.

“Apart from these murders,” she said, “do many people round here disappear from their usual haunts, Inspector?”

“Disappear, ma’am? Well, we get the usual crop. Bored and fed-up husbands running from home it is mostly. Small blame to them, say I, although I’m not a married man myself.”

“Young girls are what I want to hear about,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I want a list of all those who have disappeared during this year.”

“Not more murders, ma’am?”

“I hope not, no. But nothing very good, all the same.”

“You mean these Satanists you talk about? They may have decoyed young girls?”

“Exactly. Virgins, you see.”

The inspector looked profoundly shocked by this innocent and beautiful word.

“Obscene practices, ma’am?” he suggested.

“Not exactly; in fact, not necessarily at all. Just part of the ritual, you know. Nothing really horrid, I assure you.”

The inspector appeared to place small faith in this assurance. He sucked his teeth, and seemed to be glad when the car glided up to the pavement with the chauffeur George at the wheel.

“Norwich,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Come along, children.”

The report, and Pirberry, awaited Mrs. Bradley at her hotel, and when Mr. Os had gone, she got to work in her private sitting-room whilst Pirberry went through his case-notes and planned the further combing out of hotels

and boarding-houses in Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft, and Cromer, in search of the still-elusive and badly-wanted Amos Bleriot.

"You know," said Pirberry, seeing her look up for a moment, "we can't hold Copley, and yet I've got the feeling now that he's our man. We're keeping tabs on him, of course, but what can we prove?"

"Nothing," said Mrs. Bradley, "at present. How did the London end turn out?"

"Well, he seems to be what he represents. And he certainly did have an idiot sister living with him."

"Thereby hangs a curious fact," said Mrs. Bradley, "and one which, at present, I don't want passed on to anybody. I examined the body of Romance Copley, as you know."

"Yes?"

"My conviction is that she was perfectly normal."

"My gosh!" said Pirberry, staring. "You don't mean it *wasn't* his sister? We ought to get her identified. We've only got Copley's word, after all, that she was his sister."

"Yes, you ought to see to it," Mrs. Bradley observed. "It would make a considerable difference to the faith we can put in Copley's truthfulness if it proved not to be his sister after all."

"You betcher," agreed Pirberry, crudely, but with considerable emphasis. "I'll get on to it right away. Needn't say anything to Os, and then, if it turns out it is his sister all the time, we're no worse off."

"It is odd how generally unpopular Ms. Os seems to be," remarked Mrs. Bradley placidly.

At six o'clock next morning Mrs. Bradley got up to go for a stroll. She left the city, went out on to Mousehold Heath and stood beneath a pine tree on the slope of a gorse-covered hill. Clear against the faint, greyish sky of the morning rose the cathedral tower, topped by its spire and backed by the bulk of the castle. The ancient house of God looked sane and beautiful in contrast with the stupidities and childish gutter-nonsense of the Satanist literature she had read and considered so carefully the previous night.

Walking briskly over the hard, rough ground of the common, she returned to the city and to her breakfast. Deborah, fresh and lovely, was already seated at the breakfast table reading a morning paper. She smiled at Mrs. Bradley, and laid the paper aside.

“Jonathan won’t be long. I left him shaving,” she said. “Have you had a nice walk?”

“A very nice walk, thank you. And now, child, I want you to be very good and go home. Jonathan can go along with you. I’d rather he did.”

“He wouldn’t come,” said Deborah. “I am under no illusion at all as to which of us he really prefers. So I’m staying to join in the fun.”

“There is no fun,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I do nothing but confer with the police.”

“I like the police,” retorted Deborah, “and I’m going to stay, so you can just make up your mind to it.”

She gave an order to the waiter and proceeded to make a good breakfast, which made Mrs. Bradley’s meal of dry toast and China tea look more than usually Spartan.

“Well,” said Mrs. Bradley resignedly, “we’ll see what Jonathan says. And you will please allow me to do the talking.”

“You may, but it won’t make any difference. Aren’t I behaving nicely?”

“Yes, you are. But I shall be happier—very much happier, when you are safely with your parents.”

“Safely!” said Deborah, making an impertinent grimace. “Besides, I can’t be with them. They’ve gone to Galway. Father is fishing.”

“But, Deb, it’s so frightfully dull here,” protested Jonathan, joining in the argument directly he came down.

“If you can stand it, so can I,” said Deborah, looking obstinate.

“Well, you’ll only be a confounded nuisance,” said her husband. “And I thought you’d promised to go if you got in the way.”

“I am not in the way at present. Did you get much from all that work you did last night?” she demanded of Mrs. Bradley.

“Nothing fresh, child. I want to see Martha Huzy again, and I want, under her directions, to return to Worstead.”

“I don’t care much about the Huzys. Double-crossers, I’ll bet,” said Jonathan. “I don’t trust that crazy gang an inch.”

“Nor I, but they’ll behave as long as the brother is in custody. He is being held as accessory to the murders of Sitter, Duke, and Rilitz.”

“What about the murder of the farmer?”

“I don’t know.”

“And then there’s this woman on the sand-dunes.”

“Yes. If it weren’t for the worsted viper’s having been found on the body, there would be nothing to connect her death with that of the three street-walkers, and, except for his very slight connection with the Huzys, there is nothing at all to indicate that the death of the farmer had anything to do with the other murders. There wasn’t a viper on him.”

“No, but there seems to be that peculiar connection. Is that why you want to go back there?”

“Not exactly. I have other things to say to Martha Huzy besides emphasising her peculiar connection with the farmer. Let us start for Stalham, if both of you have finished breakfast.”

“Finished?” said Jonathan. “I haven’t begun.”

Three-quarters of an hour later they were on their way back to Stalham.

“I shan’t be long,” said Mrs. Bradley, when they were drawn up in the staithe at the top of Sutton Broad. She went straight to the house of Martha Huzy and knocked with a devil’s tattoo upon the door. The old woman opened it.

“You and your noise,” she said. “And that Martha, that isn’t in. No good you say you want her. That isn’t in, I tell you.”

“All right. Give her this,” said Mrs. Bradley, “and tell her to meet me in Worstead at ten o’clock tonight.”

“Likely that go to Worstead at ten o’clock tonight,” observed the crone, receiving Mrs. Bradley’s piece of paper distastefully. When she glanced at it, however, her face changed. “Why didn’t you tell us before you were one of them?” she enquired.

“You don’t say ‘one of us,’” Mrs. Bradley observed.

“Oh, I am not grand enough for that. Martha, that belong, and so did Elias Bennett. Put money in it, that did, after that have old row with Parson Morley. Come seven years ago, that was, and never set foot in church since. That was why our Martha think that get him.”

This speech made so many things so extraordinarily clear to Mrs. Bradley that she scarcely knew how to reply to it.

“Well, you won’t forget to give her the paper,” she said, “and tell her ten o’clock.”

“The Grand Order, I wholly suppose?” enquired the crone. Mrs. Bradley did not reply to this. She merely grinned. The old woman nodded, curtsied, and closed the door.

“So the Huzys *are* the connecting link?” said Jonathan, when he heard it. “Now, look here, you’re not going to walk into a hornet’s nest at Worstead. You think Martha Huzy will guide you to the right house, and you *don’t* think it’s the house the poisoned dart was blown from. Well, you’re not going to walk into a trap. You’ve got to get some policemen to back you up.”

“I shall arrange for that,” said Mrs. Bradley, “but not a word to the inspector. I don’t think he likes my prospecting on my own. Leave Deborah at the hotel, but you can come with us to Worstead if you choose. Some extraordinary things are going to happen, unless I’m much mistaken.” She chuckled with ghoulish relish.

• CHAPTER 22 •

“Ahem!” said the Mouse, with an important air. “Are you all ready?”

—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

They went off again almost immediately, and met the inspector. He was disgruntled.

“Beyond finding out, all over again, that Martha Huzy set her cap at him, and probably did him in out of gypsy revenge when he wouldn’t look at her, I can’t get a thing,” he complained. “Look at these for a lot of rubbish!”

He showed them a list of statements, twenty at least. He flicked the topmost irritably with his finger.

“Patience and zeal,” said Mrs. Bradley consolingly, “usually lead to some measure of success. When can I see Edgar Copley?”

“Now, if you like. Is your car here? He’s staying in Norwich. If you’ll give me a lift we can catch him perhaps before lunch.”

Her first glance at Edgar Copley dispelled one suspicion completely. He was not the man she had known as Amos Bleriot. She questioned him closely regarding the mental condition of his sister, and he answered civilly and well, giving the impression that he was nervously anxious to make a good impression.

“That’s what he’s like all the time,” said the inspector, who stood behind her chair like a tall, stout footman behind a small and poker-like duchess. “Anxious to oblige.”

“Yes, he seems harmless,” Mrs. Bradley admitted. “I wonder whether he is?”

When they were back in the police station she gave Os a smile in which amusement, triumph, and malice were nicely blended. “At least he is not the man I thought he was, and that is always something. And Mr.

Pirberry says that in London they are convinced that he is everything he seems and claims to be,” she observed.

“Yes, we’re probably barking up the wrong tree,” the inspector admitted. “And what are your future plans, ma’am?”

“Ah, yes,” said Mrs. Bradley; and proceeded to draw, very crudely, the diabolic pentagram of Amos Bleriot on the inspector’s desk with a piece of chalk. “But before I tell you about them, do you see this small seven in the east?”

As he bent over to decipher the magic symbol the inspector’s feet slipped and he crashed with his chin on the edge of the desk. It knocked him out. Mrs. Bradley exclaimed, bending over him:

“Good heavens! He won’t be fit to come with us! How extremely clumsy I am! Dear, dear!”

The crash of the inspector’s fall and the loud tones of her voice brought the sergeant and a constable. Mrs. Bradley pointed to the prostrate inspector.

“The ambulance, quickly! He’s badly hurt, and must be taken to hospital immediately. And see that they keep him very quiet,” she said.

“I’ll see to it, ma’am,” said the sergeant, gazing with more interest than sympathy at his temporary chief. There had been some local feeling, she knew, when, at the Chief Constable’s special request, a man outside the ranks of the City Police had been given charge of the case. She had been aware for some little time that the sergeant, in particular, although loyal in supporting the inspector and apt in carrying out his orders, was by no means a friend to Mr. Os.

When the ambulance had come and gone, and the inspector had been informed by the triumphant sergeant that he would not even be allowed within reach of a telephone for the next twenty-four hours, she informed Pirberry of the unlucky accident and arranged the evening’s work with him.

Having thus done all she could in Norwich, she drove back to Stalham, where Jonathan and his lovely young wife, who had passed an idyllic afternoon in lazing, cruising, and making love, were waiting for her at the head of the staithe.

She waved a skinny claw, and came aboard *O’Reilly*.

“Don’t mind me,” she said. “Do what you like. I’m going to tell myself the tale of Bone, Bone, and Bone.”

“Why not tell us?” suggested Deborah. Mrs. Bradley glanced sharply at her and shook her head solemnly.

“You wouldn’t appreciate it,” she said. “Make the most of your husband whilst you’ve got him, and, if it makes no difference to anyone, I should prefer to cruise on Barton Broad until seven, and then, perhaps, we could all go ashore and have dinner. George will have the car at the station entrance by a quarter to nine. That should give plenty of time.”

She retired to the saloon and rehearsed the tale of Minnie Baum as she had worked it out afresh from the documents, but there was nothing new to be deduced. At the end of an hour and a half she put away the dossier in a drawer under one of the bunks in the salon, and went on deck. Deborah was seated on the cabin-top, gazing straight ahead of her at the darkening water; Jonathan, pipe in mouth, and an expression of great contentment upon his features and in his half-closed eyes, was seated at the wheel, which guided the course of *O’Reilly* through the smoothly placid waters of the Broad.

“Thinking of tonight,” said Mrs. Bradley, half to herself; and a feeling almost of envy came into her mind; envy of youth, its crude passions, its neglected opportunities; its self-assurance; its creed that, since tomorrow never comes, it is idle to prepare for tomorrow, idle to envisage it, idle to take up arms against it or defend oneself against its threatening claims.

“Hullo,” said Deborah, making room for her on the cabin-top. “I’m glad I came. Isn’t it lovely? I hear that you and Jon have some game on tonight, in Worstead. He says you’ll both be back some time before the morning. I don’t know why, but I shall be glad when tomorrow comes.”

Having thus exploded all Mrs. Bradley’s theories with this one speech, she laughed, and offered her aunt-by-marriage a cigarette.

“Now listen, Deborah,” said Mrs. Bradley, “I want you to persuade Jonathan to stay with you. I don’t need him in the slightest tonight; I shall have plenty of policemen with me. His place is with you, and we must see that he agrees to that.”

Deborah shook her head.

“He won’t leave you, and I wouldn’t want him to,” she said. “But I’ll promise to lock my door, if that will relieve your mind. How soon do you want to go ashore?”

“Are you hungry? It isn’t seven, but we can go ashore now if you like.”

She climbed down into the cockpit to speak to her nephew. Deborah, watching them, saw her husband shake his head once, obstinately, and glance up as he did so.

The *O'Reilly*, which was headed south down the River Ant for its junction with the Bure near Saint Benet's Abbey, chugged contentedly at about five knots along these rivers. The turn, through Yarmouth on to Breydon Water, was accomplished slowly but safely, and then the cruiser ran freely up the Yare past Reedham and as far as Surlingham Broad, an odd little oval lake almost opposite the village of Brundell.

Here it had been arranged that *O'Reilly* should lie up for the night. George once again met them with the car, and, having been worsted in argument with her obstinate nephew, who declared roundly that if she did not take him with her he should go to Worstead by himself that night, she promised that, after dinner, when they had taken Deborah back to the hotel, she would drive with him and her police escort straight to Worstead, where she expected to meet Martha Huzy.

When at last they set out for Worstead, seated beside George was Detective Inspector Pirberry, and, following in a police car, were five imposing members of the City of Norwich constabulary.

Martha Huzy, whom they met near Smallburgh, very much alarmed at being called upon to play a part, and very much inclined to be abusive, was merely requested to point out the right house. She was then escorted back to Stalham by a policeman.

• CHAPTER 23 •

“Curiouser and curiouser!” cried Alice.
—From *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

The house pointed out by Martha Huzy was not the one from which the dart had been blown.

“Do you think she’s double-crossing you?” asked Pirberry.

“No,” Mrs. Bradley answered; but she did not enter into any details regarding the peculiar nature of the hold she had established over the superstitious and witch-ridden gypsy.

The house was an old Georgian mansion not in Worstead itself, but possibly in about the same relationship to the village as one might imagine the Bennets’ house to have been to Longbourn: of it, but not exactly in it.

The house was up for sale, but this surprised nobody. It was obviously better for the odd society whose proceedings it was proposed to watch, and, if necessary, to interrupt, to hold their meetings in secret. Having marked the house, therefore, and having assured themselves that at that hour—just on half-past ten—it was untenanted except by such (to the police) inconsiderable entities as spiders, rats, and ghosts, the party drove away from the village in the direction of North Walsham, parked the cars (in charge of one policeman) in a side-road which led past Westwick House, a mansion standing in its own park over towards the village of Swanton Abbot, and returned on foot to Worstead.

It was at five minutes to eleven that they entered the house by means of a downstairs window, which was already broken, and it was at one minute past the hour that the members of the society began to arrive.

All came on foot. No cars were heard to drive up. Conversation was unflagging and genial. The voices were cultured and agreeable. The subjects under discussion seemed to be plays, books, political news, finance

—in fact, the ordinary subjects with which people who are not close friends and yet are not strangers, either, entertain themselves and one another.

“We’ve been had,” muttered Pirberry in Mrs. Bradley’s ear. “I know some of these people. Most respectable.”

“Wait and see,” she replied.

A previous rapid exploration of the house with electric torches—two policemen on guard outside to give warning of any approach, since all the windows were uncurtained—had resulted in the discovery of the room most likely to be used. This was a large room on the first floor, which contained, in a built-in bookcase cupboard, a dozen small folding stools. A raised dais, obviously imported into the house since it had the appearance of newness, had been placed in the window recess, and in front of it was a low railing in wood, rather the shape of a fireguard, but considerably longer than a fireguard would need to be.

“No altar,” Mrs. Bradley had muttered, when these adjuncts to the worship of the devil had been noted.

The policeman who had escorted Martha Huzy back to Stalham had orders to watch the front of the Huzys’ house with the assistance of another constable who would be on duty at the back. The policeman in charge of the two cars was also debarred from being upon the scene of action, so the party inside the mansion consisted of Mrs. Bradley herself, her nephew Jonathan, Pirberry, and three constables.

“Enough to take on an army,” Jonathan contentedly observed.

One constable had been posted in the scullery, another in a large cupboard under the front staircase, and the third in a small room over the porch.

Pirberry, Mrs. Bradley, and Jonathan were in the room immediately over that in which the ceremony was to take place, and Mrs. Bradley had the option (which she had allotted to herself) of interfering with subsequent proceedings in any way which seemed either amusing or suitable. The Detective Inspector had the option of making arrests if necessary, and Jonathan had the option, claimed roundly by him from the first, of “stepping in and mixing it” if danger threatened his aunt.

None of the three had any view of the room below, but Mrs. Bradley had suggested that when the room was full they would find little difficulty in joining the ranks of the worshippers—in body if not in spirit—for she doubted whether their presence would be noticed among so many people.

After a time the voices below them dwindled and then died away. There were some shuffling sounds, followed by dead silence. Mrs. Bradley touched Pirberry's arm.

"I'm going down now," she said. "You two stay here, and come down in case of need. You know the signal. It will bring the constables, too."

This seemed commonsense to the Detective Inspector, but Jonathan, in his capacity of guardian angel to his aunt, followed her stealthily, and they crept down the uncarpeted staircase and almost bumped their faces on a dark procession of people, which was forming up on the landing.

The room, they could see, was dimly lighted by candles. A heavy curtain had been hung across the window, and when they got inside they could see that upon the dais a small table had been placed. It was covered by a dark cloth on which was some silver embroidery, and on the cloth stood a silver cage containing a magnificent white cock. A small woman clothed in red, having a hood drawn closely round her face and wearing silver gloves, was swinging a censer, filling the room with the acrid-sweet-sickly smell of incense. On the table in front of the cage, bound with silver cords and gagged with a black scarf, lay the naked body of a girl.

She was so rigid that she might have been thought to be dead, but a slight degree of attention soon assured the watchers that she breathed, although the breathing was quick and shallow.

Between the door (which was almost at the end of the room) and the dais in the window recess, a silver and black cord had been stretched from wall to wall so that the congregation, or whatever they chose to call themselves, could not advance more than halfway down the room towards the table.

Upon the built-in bookcase, flanked by two small candles, stood a tall silver jug and a large silver plate reminiscent of a paten and chalice and yet with something indescribably redolent of a banquet-hall about them. They "smelt secular" as Jonathan afterwards expressed it.

The clear part of the floor, that between the black and silver cord and the table, was in possession of a small monkey-like individual in a cassock who was on his knees marking out a pentagram in white chalk.

Some of the guests had brought folding stools of their own. Those provided by the house were resting now, still folded, against the back wall. In the most natural way in the world Mrs. Bradley took one—an example

immediately followed by her nephew—unfolded it and seated herself, but so that her face was in shadow.

Those guests who had not brought stools took the remaining ones, and very soon all were seated. One woman began some nervous giggling, and was taken out hastily by a man whose starched shirtfront suddenly winked in the candlelight as a ray caught a diamond stud. The two of them returned very soon, and the ape-man in the cassock drew, with a large wooden-legged compass attached to a piece of string pegged down in the centre of the pentagram, first one, and then another circle, of about a six-foot and a seven-foot radius respectively, and then, dismantling his apparatus and stowing it away tidily in the bookcase cupboard from which the folding stools had been taken, he took up his chalk and filled in various words in Greek characters between the two circumferences. From where she was, Mrs. Bradley could read *Minos* and parts of the two words (she deduced) *Phanes* and *Tartaros*. He then filled in some zodiac and cabalistic signs, a few sevens and crosses and the Greek letters *A*, *B*, and *G* on his pentagram, made a sign to avert the Evil Eye, bowed seven times round the circle as though to the seven infernal princes, and stepped carefully out of the symbols. He went towards the bookcase, murmured something to the woman acolyte, and both of them stepped backwards and disappeared. No sound had been heard, but it was evident that there must be a small door through which the servers and the priest of the mysteries could make their entrances and exits.

In less than a minute the acolyte returned, this time without her censer but bearing upon a black and silver cushion a short, broad-bladed, sacrificial knife. The knife she placed on the recumbent figure of the girl upon the table, and then retired again. The white cock fluttered and squawked, as though some instinct warned it of its approaching demise. Some of the spectators shivered, but with a kind of unhealthy, erotic excitement, it seemed to Mrs. Bradley; certainly not from fear.

As though the noise made by the bird had been a signal, in from the bookcase corner stepped a dignified man. He was dressed in a black robe, one shoulder of which was silver in the design of a crowing cock. Round his neck was a heavy silver chain with a great squat toad in silver on the end of it. He was preceded by the acolyte, holding a candle. She advanced the candle towards his breast as though to demonstrate the symbols on gown and silver chain.

The congregation stood up. The woman who had giggled before now gave a low moan of excitement, and it seemed to Mrs. Bradley that the priest of the mysteries scowled at her as though he had been put out by her behaviour.

Then the service began: but it was not the service of the Black Mass, with which, by reading, by observation, and through the confessions of overwrought patients, Mrs. Bradley was almost drearily familiar. This service, while combining some of the elements of Voodoo ritual with some of the trappings of the Black Mass and a good many of its childish perversions, was something new. No one thing in it was original, but the component parts of the service had been put together in such a way that the mystery under celebration was, in its complete form, a new ritual.

There was nothing obscene about it, and nothing unpleasant, except for the death of the cock, and even this was, at any rate, instantaneous. The body of the girl upon the table, far from being repulsive in any way, was beautiful. Her nakedness was the sculptured coldness of a sixth-century stèle. Her enforced stillness was that of a statue.

The ritual began with the recitation of what appeared to be a prayer. This was intoned by the priest only, the part supplied by the congregation consisting only of the word *Phanes*, murmured politely by the worshippers at intervals.

The prayer seemed to be an invocation, so far as Mrs. Bradley could make out, of the long-superseded goddess Ishtar. The priest pleaded for Ishtar to manifest herself to the people. When it was concluded, the congregation remained standing and the priest stepped over the rims of the two circles and into the pentagram and continued, this time passionately, to invoke the goddess. She, needless to say, made no more response than Baal to the priests of Jezebel, and, working himself into a frenzy, the priest turned his back on the congregation, leapt out of the pentagram and across the circles to the table, and was handed the sacrificial knife by the acolyte.

The monkey-man who had drawn out the magic formulae on the floor had not returned. Mrs. Bradley supposed from some sharp sentences, which were hissed from priest to acolyte at the table, that he ought to have returned and had not. Between his hissed instructions, the priest moaned and slavered, working himself up, it appeared, to the first peak of the ritual. Just as he picked up the silver cage containing the cock, the acolyte disappeared through the bookcase corner, and the hysterical worshipper

who had twice given way already, now appeared to be completely overcome, and, giving a slight scream, made for the door, closely pursued by her male escort of the diamond studs, and, to Jonathan's surprise and great dismay, by his aunt, who hurried out with her as though to render some assistance.

Once in the passage, however, Mrs. Bradley did not hesitate. She pushed past the two in the darkness, made for the adjoining room, and twisted the handle. She had expected that the room would be locked, but it was not. Inside it was brightly lighted by large electric bulbs connected with batteries, and there in the middle of it was Pirberry with a grin on his face, a gun in his hand, and the monkey-man in handcuffs. The acolyte, with an almost ludicrous expression of surprise and fright on her painted countenance, was standing stiffly in front of him with her hands up.

"I want those robes," said Mrs. Bradley. "Off with them. Go on. He won't shoot if you're quick."

The woman took off her bright red robes, and Mrs. Bradley put them on. She changed shoes with the woman, too, and humanely gave her her coat, since she was now clad only in a vest.

"What were you going to take in with you?" she asked. The woman pointed to a glass vessel shaped like a fan. It was flat and shallow, and the handle of the fan formed a straight bar of glass with which to hold it.

"What is it for?" she asked quickly. The woman pointed to her mouth and opened it. To the horror of the Detective Inspector, who let out a startled, although muttered oath, she had no tongue.

"All to the good," said Mrs. Bradley. She pulled the hood well over her face, drew on the acolyte's silver gloves, picked up the glass fan-shaped vessel and found that the bookcase angle was screened by double, baize-covered doors which screened all light from the room in which the ritual was being performed. She slipped through and handed the glass vessel to the priest. He scowled at her and made an impatient signal to her to hold it. He had the cock by the feet in one hand, the sacrificial knife in the other. Actually he made a spectacle ludicrous rather than terrifying, she thought; an opinion which appeared to be shared by at least two other persons present, for she distinctly heard a young man's voice observe, "Two to one in ponies on the cock," and another's reply, "Done."

The priest knew his job, however, and with a high cry of triumph he sliced off the cock's head with such dexterity that it fell in the very middle

of the pentagram. His success appeared to cause him some elation, for he muttered "Golly! What a shot!" as he held the cock so that some of the blood might spurt into the fan-shaped dish. Then, whilst the worshippers called upon Phanes—except those who called upon Ishtar—he took the fan-shaped vessel and, turning his back on the congregation, went to the bound and gagged girl upon the table and began to pour the cock's blood, drop by drop, on to the table but not actually on to her body. Mrs. Bradley followed closely and found herself looking into the agonised, horrified eyes of Kitty Trevelyan, whom she had supposed safe in the south of the county, far enough from horrors and enjoying the last remaining days of her holiday.

The blood dripped from the table, and the priest, retrieving what he could of it in the fan-shaped vessel, muttered to Mrs. Bradley without turning his head:

"What's happened to Picket? Why doesn't he come in?"

Mrs. Bradley grunted.

"Oh, no good asking *you* to tell me," he continued, as though recollecting that the acolyte was dumb. Something in the tone warned Mrs. Bradley, however. Still upon the table was the knife, stained now by the cock's bright blood, but razor-keen and very handy. The priest turned round with the fan-shaped vessel in his hands, and Mrs. Bradley was aware that the worshippers had left their stools, were crowded at the black and silver cord, and were kneeling with closed eyes and faces lifted towards the ceiling.

She had, with a sudden shock, a vision of the woman who had been found dead on board *Calpurnia*, her throat slit right across and so deeply that her head was almost hanging off. She had recognised the priest as Amos Bleriot. It looked as though, unless something were done, there would be yet another victim.

She had a little bottle, very firmly stoppered, in her pocket, under the heavy red robes. With it—wrapped round it, in fact—was a small, thin cotton handkerchief.

Amos Bleriot, advancing with mincing, almost dancing steps towards his congregation, began to chant, in Greek, the hymn to the sun. The people's heads began to move in unison very slowly from side to side. One man, whose face Mrs. Bradley could just see, had flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth. She could hear those out of her orbit of vision drawing sharp breaths as though they were excited and afraid. She stood

aside, muffling her face, and as Bleriot began to touch the throats of the worshippers with the tip of his index-finger which he dipped in the blood of the cock, she, too, knelt down, and being by this time behind him as well as to the side, and being also outside the light thrown from the candles on the table, she fumbled under the robes for the bottle and the handkerchief.

It was as he returned to the table that she got him. He went down like a log under her skilfully timed hook round his ankle, and as he fell she fell on him and smothered his mouth and nostrils in the saturated handkerchief. He snorted and struggled for a moment, but the powerful anaesthetic finished him. She advanced towards the congregation, the heavy knife in her hand, and picked up the chant with another, supplying her own ritual words—scraps from Orphic worship, sentences from the ancient ritual of the Phrygian mysteries, recollections of the religion (what is known or can be deduced of it) of the Minoan mysteries of Crete. Even Aristophanes and Hesiod, even the aphorisms of Herakleites and the teachings of Pythagoras, found a place in the jumbled, extraordinary, poetic nonsense, which she intoned in her glorious voice, standing there like a sibyl beside the prostrate body of the priest.

The people, some of whom had stood up, did not at first know what to make of the course events had taken, but the continuation of what appeared to be the ritual, combined with the magic charm of a voice engaged in the sonorous sentences of the Neo-Satanist Creed (as it was afterwards referred to in print by one of the congregation who happened to be a journalist, had come out of curiosity, and was accustomed to writing shorthand in an insufficient light and amid romantic and improbable surroundings) kept them silent and held them in thrall.

“The Bull is the father of the Serpent,” pronounced Mrs. Bradley, with the solemn declamation of prophecy, “and the Serpent is the father of the Bull.

“Chaos is the Beginning; thence arise Gaia, Tartaros, and Eros.

“Time is a silver egg in the Divine Ether, and from this Egg is borne Phanes, the creator of the world.”

“Phanes! Phanes!” moaned the congregation, picking up the keynote of their own Mysteries.

“The Lycian wild gods are twelve,” intoned Mrs. Bradley. “The Thirteenth is their leader.

“Power is Life, although it has no name. Who governs, binds: and there is a Yoke upon us.”

She stepped forward and laid her free hand on the black and silver cord which separated the sanctuary from the public part of the room. The other now held the knife. Then she turned back upon her audience, and advanced to the table upon which the girl still lay bound. She cut her bonds swiftly and cleanly with the knife, bundled her up in the cloth that was on the table, and blew out both the candles. She pushed the frightened girl through the little doorway. Then she advanced again, and continued her chant.

“The Courtiers gain possession of the Body.” She indicated the helpless priest of the mysteries. “But the Hero displays the Monster’s Tongue.

“The Rivers are to be worshipped, and the Place of the Darker Waters is to the Son of Semele.

“Time is a child who plays and moves the pieces; the leadership is to the Child. Even so it is with Heracles, Strangler of Serpents.

“As it is for Minos and Orion, so it is for the worshippers.

“Think upon him who weaves his rope in vain.” Her voice began to rise. She had seen Jonathan make his stealthy way to the door.

“Think upon him who is seated on the skin of the Vulture.

“Think upon the Ferryman, and read well the Gold Leaves which are laid in the Place of the Dead.”

Her voice rose to the wildest heights of frenzy, and she pointed a yellow claw (from which the red sleeve fell away, revealing upon the index finger an enormous ruby set in a platinum ring) at the two small candles still burning upon the bookcase.

“Who is it walking with Cock’s Feet among the souls of the living?

“Who is it trampling with taurine hoof in the sacred Hall of the Axes?

“Whose altar is it, like a tree?

“Where the lions and the leopards are reared, and where they climb, where the Pillar is standing above the gates of blood, where the mountains roll together, there he is.”

So he was, if she meant Detective Inspector Pirberry. Followed quietly by Jonathan and the constables whom he had rounded up for the purpose, he made an effective entrance.

“Sit down, all of you!” he said calmly. “Everyone is under arrest.”

• CHAPTER 24 •

“Alice did not much like her keeping so close to her; first, because the Duchess was very ugly; and secondly because she was exactly the right height to rest her chin on Alice’s shoulder, and it was an uncomfortably sharp chin.”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“But, of course, it doesn’t get us all the way, does it?” said Jonathan, sprawled on *O’Reilly’s* deck and eating cokernut chips out of a large paper bag.

“Well, I don’t know,” replied his aunt, who was seated sedately near him and was engaged with her knitting, a shapeless piece of work in a particularly oppressive shade of gamboges. “It has given Mr. Pirberry what he calls ‘an even break.’ The inspector, who feels much better, I am glad to say, states that he is pleased at getting Amos Bleriot into his clutches, and I have had the opportunity of speaking my mind to the students, whom I have sent to their homes.”

“Yes; how came the fair Kitty to be mixed up with all that push?”

“Thereby hangs a tale, fortunately a short one. The three girls sailed down to Beccles, and, I thought, were away from the possibility of mischief. Unfortunately, Miss Menzies conceived the idea that they ought to come back and form a bodyguard for me. They did return, and Kitty was captured when, against all advice, she went for a walk alone into Stalham, to purchase provisions for their boat.”

“You mean she was kidnapped in broad daylight, then?”

“Well, no; rather, at dusk. The provisions were beer.”

“Ah, I see. And how long had she been with the devil lot?”

“Only that one evening, thank goodness. They had another virgin in stock, as it were—which reminds me that I never had that list from Inspector Os about girls who have been missing from their homes—but it

seems (for Bleriot has confessed it) that they knew it would annoy me more that they should have chosen Kitty.”

“I see. Well, we’ve still got to prove the murders against Bleriot, I suppose. It’s all right to have pinched him for kidnapping—I take it that’s what the charge will have to be?—there’s no law against founding a new religion, is there?—otherwise”—he chuckled and caught his aunt’s eye—“you could be had up yourself.”

“No, there’s no law against founding a new religion,” Mrs. Bradley answered. “But do you mean to tell me that you do not realise the most important thing of all?”

“What’s that?”

“We have not caught the worst of these people yet, child; only the decoy ducks.”

“The—? That reminds me of something, but I don’t know what”

“It reminds me of something, too, but I *do* know what,” replied his aunt, handing him his tobacco pouch as he finished the cokernut chips and tossed the bag into the water. “Your untidy, anti-social methods of consigning waste paper to the deep would offend Alice Boorman’s sense of tidiness and civic responsibility,” she added sternly.

Jonathan paused in the act of filling his pipe, and glanced at her curiously.

“You’ve got something on your mind,” he said. “What is it?”

“I’m glad I sent those girls home,” said his aunt, with apparent irrelevance. “I wish we could have exercised the same authority over Deborah.”

“I’m all right,” said her niece by marriage, looking up from her place in the well, where she sat, wearing sunglasses, reading a novel. “I did exactly as I was told in Norwich, refused to see anybody, locked my bedroom door every second I was alone, and behaved in all respects like a well-disposed idiot child. But here I am with you again, and this time if there’s fun I’m going to be in the thick of it.”

“Yes, and nice fools we shall look, if they kidnap *you*,” said her husband.

“It wouldn’t be any use. I mean, I’m no longer—”

“Hush! Don’t be coarse. The higher education tends to broaden women’s minds in a most undesirable way,” said Jonathan, grinning.

“Well, anyhow, you’ve caught the kidnappers.”

“You’ve just heard Aunt Adela say that the biggest fish didn’t come into the net. We should be completely sunk if he collected a low gang, spirited you from our midst, and then held us up on the strength of it. No, my girl. You’re getting out of all this while the going’s good. You’ll only queer our patch if you stay. How long will it take you to pack your bags?”

“I say, you *are* going to have some fun, aren’t you?” said Deborah, but not at all resentfully. “I can pack my bags in half an hour, I suppose, and go right away now. There’s no earthly reason why not, except the mere fact that I’d much rather stay and take a chance with you, and that, in fact, I am going to stay and take a chance. I am all for the equality of the sexes, especially when it comes to sharing dangers.”

She put aside her book, and got up.

“That’s remarkably naughty of Deborah,” said Mrs. Bradley. “You go with her. I shan’t feel entirely happy until she’s safely in Edinburgh. George can drive you to Peterborough, and you can get a train from there on the main line.”

“Can do. But you look after yourself, mind, while I’ve gone.”

“I’ll see you again tomorrow or the next day,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“You’ll see me again tonight,” her nephew replied. “Once Deb is on the train she’ll be all right. You’re in far greater danger than she is.”

“That is not your concern,” said his aunt. They ran the cruiser back to Acle and had just disembarked when the inspector came along, highly jubilant, and with nothing but a badly bruised chin to mark his accident.

“A smart bit of work, ma’am,” he said. “I only wish I’d been there, as well as Mr. Pirberry. I should say we’re all fixed up for at least three hangings.”

“Three, Inspector?” said Mrs. Bradley, surprised.

“Sure, ma’am. This man Amos Bleriot for the three women, Martha Huzy (I’ll bust that alibi of hers, if it takes me night and day to do it) for Bennett, and Copley for his sister.”

“Oh, yes, I see,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Can you prove it against Copley, then?”

“Well, ask yourself, ma’am! The girl is murdered during the time he reckons he left her. No witnesses have come forward to back up his story. She’s found on board his yacht. What would you do in my place?”

“Arrest him. But nothing is proved, you know. And how did he get the serpent? He didn’t steal it from me.”

She pulled out the serpent she had been given, and dangled it between two yellow fingers.

"That's the only snag," the inspector admitted. "But there's nothing much in it, after all. Your three young ladies got hold of one all right. No saying how many of 'em's about. He might have got it from anywhere."

"So he might. But, barring the one I made for myself"—she drew that one out, and held it in her other hand—"there's nothing to indicate that serpents can be obtained except through the agency of Martha Huzy. You would have to show some connection between her and Edgar Copley, I imagine."

"That shouldn't be difficult, ma'am. I feel equal to anything, now we've got so far."

"I'm sure you do," said Mrs. Bradley, with a singularly mirthless grin. "I wonder whether you feel equal to giving me a lift into Norwich? My nephew and his wife are going to borrow my car, and I am somewhat stranded without it."

"Surely, ma'am. With pleasure. Hop in, if you're ready to start. The police station? Want to see Pirberry? I'm afraid you'll be unlucky there. He was recalled by the Yard for a conference early this morning. The message came through about an hour and a half after he'd turned in his prisoners. I took the call, as he'd gone off to get a little sleep."

"They let you out of hospital soon enough," Mrs. Bradley observed.

"As a matter of fact, I'm A.W.O.L., ma'am, I'm afraid. I couldn't stay cooped up there with all this excitement going on."

"I suppose not, no. But I think you are rather unwise. Still, you look better. Yes, I did want to see Mr. Pirberry. But it isn't important. It can wait."

"So you won't want to go to Norwich, ma'am?"

"No. I'll stay on board and write up my notes. How long does he expect to be away?"

"Not more than a couple of days, ma'am."

"Oh, that's all right, then. Now he's made all those arrests, we ought to be able to take our ease, ought we not?"

"I guess we ought, ma'am. A fine bit of work. I only wish I had been in at the death, as it were."

"Well, it didn't come to that," said Mrs. Bradley.

“No, but it will,” said Os, giving a significant smile. “Well, I’ll now go back and break down Martha Huzy’s alibi.”

“Let me know how you get on. I shall watch your progress there with very great interest. My own impression still is that Martha’s alibi is unassailable.”

“We shall see,” said Os, getting back into the police car. “By the way, ma’am, how come it you can tell those vipers apart?”

Mrs. Bradley glanced at the snakes in her hands.

“My kinaesthetic sense informs me of the difference, Mr. Os.”

“Ah,” said the inspector. He started up the car, waved a large official hand, and was off.

As soon as he was gone, Mrs. Bradley left Jonathan and Deborah arguing over the need for her departure, walked into Stalham, and hired a car. The garage hands admitted that it was not much of a car for looks, but guaranteed the engine. They agreed that they could supply a driver, listened sympathetically to Mrs. Bradley’s piteous assertion that railway travel made her ill and that she could only travel in a car if the curtains were drawn on the sunny side and she was lying flat on the back seat with her knees up to ease the strain on the stomach, winked surreptitiously at Fred, the driver of the car, and accepted cigarettes.

“Queer old party,” was their verdict on Mrs. Bradley; and then they dismissed her from their minds. They could not know that she had excellent reasons for taking a journey to Norwich in a car, which would not be particularly remarked upon and whose numbers would have no significance for her enemies. She smiled at Fred, and got in. Fred, a nice boy, drove slowly, as he had been instructed. They made frequent halts, so that Mrs. Bradley could “get her breath,” as she put it, and finally arrived in Norwich at a quarter to five.

Fred, under instructions, drove, not to Mrs. Bradley’s hotel, but to a charming Georgian inn hard by Saint Peter Mancroft and the market.

“And now,” said Mrs. Bradley, paying him for the hire of the car and adding a generous tip, “to set matters in train for the Old Bailey.”

Fred, who had come to the conclusion during the drive that she was harmless but a lunatic, took no notice of this remark, thanked her for the tip, watched her enter the inn, and then went into its public bar for some beer.

Mrs. Bradley had her dinner at the inn, and then asked where was the telephone.

“Inspector Os, ma’am?” said the sergeant’s voice from the other end. “Very sorry, but that go to his lodgings just half an hour ago. Yes, that’s on the telephone, ma’am, or I could ring through your message from here. You’ll go round and see him, ma’am? Very good, then, ma’am. He lodge in Plantain Street, the third on the left from the market.”

“Don’t tell him I’m coming. I have a surprise for him,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“The case, ma’am?”

“Certainly.” She put down the receiver, went back to the dining room and asked the maid who had waited upon her to direct her to Plantain Street.

The inspector, however, was not in. Mrs. Bradley knocked twice, but only the echoes of the knocking answered her. She lifted the flap of the letterbox and peered into the hall. Almost halfway down the passage, flung through the letterbox by a too-enthusiastic postman, lay three envelopes. The last delivery had been at half-past five. It looked as though the sergeant were mistaken in supposing that the inspector had gone home when he left the police station. Even the busiest man will stop to pick up his letters.

She went round to the back of the house and broke a window. Then she undid the catch and scrambled in. Taking out her revolver, she made a quick search of the house, but no one was there, not even a dog or a cat. The inspector, she knew, was a bachelor. It had come out one day in a joke between himself and Pirberry, so she had not expected to find a woman in the house.

The inspector, however, it seemed, had a womanish hobby. Dolls, in all stages of dress and undress, lay scattered about the bedroom. One was particularly hideous. It had black hair, a yellowish face, and was dressed in a long dark skirt, a magenta jacket, and a chip straw hat with a band of cherry-coloured ribbon.

Mrs. Bradley went to the mirror, glanced in it, grinned, and, taking out a small pocket comb, carefully combed the doll’s hair. Skilfully and neatly woven in with it were some long, black human hairs. She took out her notebook, opened it at a clean page, laid the hairs on it, and then, wiping carefully the comb she took off her hat and combed her own black hair.

One or two hairs came out. She laid them with those from the doll, and then took out her small magnifying glass. So far as she could see, they were some of her own hair-combings, which had come from the doll. She scribbled a confession of what she had done, signed it, and put it just behind

a small crucifix, which, with a Bible, was placed on the bedside table upon which this particular doll had been laid.

She opened the window, threw the hair-combings out, and, collecting all the dolls she could find, she heaped them together in the centre of the inspector's bed, wrote *Mormon* on another piece of paper, and, with a cackle, placed it upon the pillow. Then she returned to the police station. The sergeant, who was about to go off duty, sighed a little, but politely escorted her to the inspector's office.

"He hired a sea-going cruiser, ma'am, and went off. He said he should be back, ma'am. Anything I can do for you?" he enquired. "A telegram came for him, but as he said he should be back I haven't opened it."

He saw her seated, lighted the cigarette she took out, accepted one for himself, and went, at her request, to find the superintendent.

"I've no witness to prove that I found this where I found it," she observed, when the superintendent joined her. "But I would like you to take charge of it if you will."

She produced a piece of dark blue velvet similar to that which had been used to muffle the rowlocks and oars of the boat. She told him where she had found it, and admitted that she thought Mr. Os had escaped.

When the superintendent, still open-mouthed, had gone, she picked up the telegram and opened it. It was from Pirberry and read:

"Some mistake. Was not sent for. Returning."

"Well, well," said Mrs. Bradley to herself. She stayed no longer, but returned to Acle in a police car, a constable driving, and found her nephew and his wife extremely worried.

"A nice one you are," grumbled Jonathan. "We've been having a fit, thinking they'd got you after all."

"I wish you'd gone, Deborah," said his aunt. "Mr. Pirberry is in London, Mr. Os has gone gallivanting off on some business of his own, and I don't like to think of you still here. I am no scaremonger, but, really, it isn't safe."

"Os has been here," said Jonathan. "I am afraid we were compelled to stall a little, as Deb's plans seem a bit uncertain. Still, that didn't matter at all. It was you he came to see. Talked a lot about Walsingham. By the way, what *was* all that about Walsingham? I mean, surely you don't still think—I can't see that there can be anybody left to do the stealing. That is, if you were serious. I can't really believe that you were."

“About stealing the east end of the Abbey, child? No, I wasn’t serious. I suppose you don’t know where we could hire a sea-going cruiser? Preferably farther up the coast, and not in Norfolk.”

“Whatever for?”

“Fun.”

“Fun? What do you call fun?”

“Wait and see, child. I wonder how Mr. Os is getting on with Martha Huzy?”

“Why should he get on with her at all?”

“He said he was going to break down her alibi for August Bank Holiday. You remember she claimed to have been at her stall near the river. By the way, what else did he say to you while he was here?”

“He asked us first whether you were still on board the cruiser. I said you were, but were resting, and that either he could leave a message or come again later on, as I wasn’t going to disturb you.”

“You didn’t tell him where you were taking Deborah, I suppose? That is, if we can persuade her to go home?”

“Actually, I did. He said she’d hardly get a train from Norwich to make the connections, unless she didn’t mind travelling all night with perhaps a good bit of waiting about on stations, so I said we were going to get the main line at Peterborough, and would have to look up a train. At that he dug out a timetable—he had an A.B.C. and a Bradshaw in the police car—and thumbed it up for us. The earliest train tomorrow reaches York, he informed me, at just after twelve; so I told him I’d telephoned Deborah’s aunt in York, and she had said she’d have her for the night if the trains proved awkward. Right or wrong of me?”

“You’re much too intelligent,” said his aunt, with her crocodile grin.

“What is all this about Inspector Os?” enquired Deborah, sensing that something was wrong.

“Have you ever thought what his name means?” asked Mrs. Bradley. “Think it out, child.” She glanced with real approval at her nephew.

“I have not forgotten,” said she, “that you gained a prize for French at your preparatory school.”

“He’s lived that down,” said Deborah. “But what’s French got to—?”

“Bone,” said Jonathan simply. “Os. Bone. *Bone!* The name of the man who went to Broadmoor after that London murder!”

“Exactly,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Coincidence, very likely,” she added, “but I’ve suspected him for some time. So many things would fall into place should he prove to be the murderer. I happen to know he dabbles in black magic.”

She described the fantastic collection of witchcraft dolls which she had discovered at his lodgings, and mentioned the dark blue velvet.

“He and this chap Bleriot, working together, could have committed the murders, planted the vipers, thrown dust in Pirberry’s eyes and got away with it all, if you hadn’t rumbled him,” said Jonathan. “Well, Deb can’t go to York now.”

“Thank you for nothing. She wasn’t going anyway,” said his wife. “What I want is adventure.”

“What you want is a hiding,” said her husband. “But as we can’t make you see reason, I suppose you’ll have to stay. But for goodness’ sake watch your step and mind what you’re up to. I don’t imagine this merchant will stop at much now he knows Aunt Adela has found out who and what he is.”

“He doesn’t know she’s found it out,” said Deborah; but Mrs. Bradley was unable to accept this view.

“He will know as soon as he returns to his lodgings,” she observed. “Besides, I cannot help thinking he knew, when I put down grease on the floor of his office and hooked his foot on to it, and got him carried away to hospital so that we could go to Worstead without him, that something had come out somewhere. And now he’s gone off in a sea-going cruiser, I hear.”

“I say!” said Jonathan laughing. “Did you really do that?”

“And kept him out of range of a telephone, so that he could not warn Amos Bleriot,” said Mrs. Bradley.

“I say,” said Jonathan again, struck by another and a much less pleasant thought, “that means that if he wanted to, he could set Amos Bleriot free. He had him more or less in his keeping, I suppose?”

“No. Our good Pirberry has him,” replied Mrs. Bradley, “but it seemed only fair to let Os know that the game was up. I went to his house to tell him so, but, as you know, I did not find him in. This little affair has been a personal matter between us, and it seemed only fair to play according to the rules.”

“Well, I’m dashed!” said her nephew. His aunt grinned, and then said:

“By the way, there’s a question of mine you haven’t answered. I don’t suppose you can answer it, but, as you have an interest in such pleasures, I

will ask you again. I suppose you cannot tell me where I can hire a sea-going cruiser? Preferably a fast one, and not in Norfolk.”

“Oh, that! Well, not nearer than Hull, so far as I’m concerned. A pal of mine there has got one. He keeps it up at Goole. I don’t know whether he’s using it at present, but I can jolly soon find out. If I hadn’t been an ass and got married”—he grinned at his wife, who grimaced—“I’d have been across to Sweden with him this year. I don’t suppose he *is* using it just now, as we should have gone six weeks ago.”

“I wish you’d see what you can do about it, then,” said Mrs. Bradley. A thought struck her. “I’ll tell you what,” she said. “Let’s kill two birds with one stone. We’ll drive to Hull, thus taking ourselves out of the orbit of Mr. Os for a bit, and you can speak to your friend personally on the matter.”

• CHAPTER 25 •

“A knot!” said Alice, always ready to make herself useful, and looking anxiously about her. “Oh, do let me help to undo it!”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

It was thick night when the car slowed into Fakenham and George, under instructions, drove gently through the sleeping town and out to the western end of it. Here he pulled up whilst Mrs. Bradley, who was seated beside him in front, consulted a road map, and discussed the route with him. Deborah, asleep with her head on her husband's shoulder, and Jonathan, also asleep in his corner of the car, took no part in the discussion. Mrs. Bradley and her chauffeur were soon in agreement. George drove on eastwards to King's Lynn and across the wide River Ouse, and at Holbeach Mrs. Bradley took his place at the wheel and told him to get some sleep.

It was still dark at Lincoln, but the dawn was grey by the time they got into Doncaster. At Selby they branched off for Hull, and at Hull they stopped for breakfast.

The anonymous letter was handed over by George just after their arrival at the hotel. He had found it on the bonnet of the car. Someone, he deduced, had placed it there in passing, as he had got down to open the door of the lock-up to which the car had been assigned.

“Plenty of people in and out of the yard, madam. Anybody could have left it. I shouldn't be any the wiser, unless it happened to be somebody known to me personally by sight.”

“Quite,” said Mrs. Bradley, perusing the missive.

“So you got little Deborah away all right. That can wait,” said the letter. “We've got little Kitty again. Not the same thing, of course, but no doubt you'll be able to identify the remains. Have tipped off the other little dears where you are. Happy landings, old serpent.”

“Hm!” said Mrs. Bradley. “Now what on earth have those wretched students been up to? Why aren’t they in their own homes?”

She soon knew the answer to this question. Scarcely had they finished breakfast when she received a polite message that she was urgently required in the lounge by two unknown and (she imagined) dishevelled young ladies.

They were, of course, Alice and Laura.

“We hitchhiked,” Laura explained. “Nearly as much hike as hitch, by the feel of my legs.”

Mrs. Bradley, who disliked the public rooms in nearly all hotels, asked for a private sitting-room. The girls seemed completely exhausted, and, as they began to tell their tale, Alice began to cry.

Mrs. Bradley sent for sandwiches and coffee, and told them to be quiet until they were rested. The refreshment seemed to be welcome. By the time the sandwiches were finished and a third pot of coffee had been ordered, the two girls were themselves again, and Laura took up the tale.

“You sent us home, and honestly we meant to go,” she said. “It wasn’t our fault this time old Kitty got mislaid. We had half an hour to wait on Norwich station. I was taking Alice home with me for the rest of the holidays. We’ve got about another four weeks, you see, and we thought we’d do our holiday stuff for College.

“Well, we went into the refreshment place for a bun and such, and a man pushed in and said he’d come from Mr. Os and we were to return at once to Stalham. You’d been knocked out and were half-cold, and they’d arrested a man and thought we might be able to identify him.

“Well, there was a car waiting, and two more men, and the thing was that they helped old Kitty in, in a gentlemanly sort of way, and then, just as young Alice was going to step up—”

“One of them knocked me back so hard that I cannoned into Laura and nearly sent her flying,” put in Alice.

“Would have, only she happens to be such a light weight. As it was, I only did a bit of a stagger, and so was able to absorb and note down the number of the car.”

“We went straight to Mr. Os at the police station,” said Alice, “and told him what had happened. He was ever so nice, and we gave him the number of the car—at least, Laura did—and, of course, he told us that, so far as he knew, you were quite all right as he’d only spoken to you that day.

“Well, we were nearly frantic, and didn’t know what to do. The inspector told us to tell you he’d left for Yarmouth. We went to Stalham, and a man lounging there told us you’d said you were going to Hull.”

“Hm! We must have been followed and a telephone message sent back to this lounge. Poor children,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Well, now you must get some rest, and then we’ll get to work.”

“But, Kitty—” began Alice, looking horrified.

“Mrs. Bradley’s right,” said Laura. “We’re no good in the state we are at present. My feet!”

“They’ve been pretty thorough,” said Jonathan, when he had heard the story.

“There’s no harm done, I hope,” said Mrs. Bradley. “In fact, it’s as well that the students are here. Laura can help with the cruiser. We can do with an extra hand.”

“If you’ll let me have the car, I’ll run along now and see about the cruiser,” said Jonathan. “You’d better come with me, Deb. Then we needn’t take George. I daresay he’d like a rest after driving all night.”

George had not driven all night, but Mrs. Bradley did not say so. She counselled her nephew not to leave his wife alone. When she had seen them off she sat down to work out the most probable movements of Mr. Os, who had shown considerable enterprise, she thought, in having them trailed as far as Hull.

By the time Jonathan and Deborah returned, the students were almost themselves again. Jonathan tried to be jocose about Kitty’s second kidnapping adventure, but it was clear that her companions were far too much upset by what had happened to be able to joke about it, even with him.

“The first thing to do, I suppose,” he said, immediately giving up the *badinage* and addressing himself to his aunt, “is to get back to Norwich with all speed and connect up with Pirberry. You say that he’s wise to—”

“Oh, I’m sure about that,” said Mrs. Bradley interrupting him and at the same time kicking him sharply upon the ankle to indicate that it was not at present in the general interest that the girls should distrust Inspector Os. “He’s an intelligent man.”

“Quite,” agreed her nephew, heroically concealing the agony the kick had caused him. “Well, we can have the cruiser, so let’s get along to her, shall we?”

So the party, including Laura and Alice, went westwards out to Goole, and found the cruiser, a fast boat capable of just under thirty knots, moored at the left bank of the river.

Jonathan saw the party on board, and then went to the controls, which were in a glassed-in cabin forward. He was closely followed by Laura.

“That’s it,” said he to her. “You’re second in command of the ship. Power-Meadows engines up to a hundred horsepower each. We ought to be able to catch anything they’re likely to muster.”

“Off we go,” said Mrs. Bradley. There was an unusual degree of excitement in her tone. Jonathan started the engines and the cruiser, foaming at the stern, eased away from her moorings. Jonathan engaged the clutch, and soon she was passing an island in the river and rounding the sharp bend by Hook. She dropped down past Goole, on the right bank, made the hairpin beyond it, and then, picking up the ebb tide, was soon among craft of all kinds in the vast width of the Humber estuary.

“If we don’t get them, then Mr. Pirberry will,” said Mrs. Bradley to Deborah and Alice, who were seated beside her in the stern. The glassed-in control cabin was forward, and the whole length of the main cabin lay between them and Jonathan and Laura.

The cruiser slowed among the crowded vessels and the coming and going of ships. There was plenty to see, and Alice, forgetting in the fascinating scene on the traffic-laded estuary her anxieties about Kitty, gazed interestedly on either side at a sight which could not fail to engage the close attention of any Londoner.

Sunk Island was left far to port, and the cruiser ran in close to Grimsby, avoiding Spurn Head. Now she was striking south, and the breeze, which had been fresh but not noticeably strong in the channel, struck them with sudden violence.

Jonathan, distrustful of the coast, which he did not know, kept out to sea, and, setting a course for Cromer, followed the route of the Grimsby-Rotterdam steamers.

Laura took over the controls whilst he worked out his course. Her experience had been on inland waters only, but following his directions and advice, she managed to handle the powerful, sea-going cruiser like an expert.

“Good work,” said Jonathan approvingly, taking over again. “How do you like her?”

“Marvellous,” said Laura, in the inadequate phraseology of her generation. “When are we due at Yarmouth?”

“Ought to make Cromer before tea, anyway. I don’t much like the look of the weather, but unless it blows a gale it shouldn’t affect us much in this. She ought to bucket through anything. Get along aft, would you, and suggest to the others that something to eat wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

The wind increased a little during the afternoon. Jonathan was asking twenty knots from the cruiser, although she could go faster. Fortunately there was no tendency on her part to “turn,” as she was equipped with twin screws, so no helm was needed to keep her on a straight course. The sea, however, grew heavier, and Laura went off several times to see how the others were getting on.

It grew so cold on the open deck that at about half-past three Deborah and Alice took shelter in the cabin, for Alice, who, a good enough sailor ordinarily, was beginning to feel what some have called, euphemistically, the motion of the vessel, thought she had better lie down.

Hot tea and dry biscuits revived her, and the cruiser was off Cromer by a quarter past four. Although the wind was boisterous there was still a brightly shining sun.

Jonathan, keeping well outside the five fathoms line with its extraordinary divagation at the edge of the sandbank known (with a marked lack of originality) as Foulness, was able to come in a little closer off Mundesley, and the trip south of Mundesley as far as the deeper channel called Hemsly Hole was without incident.

It was from the lightship just south of Hemsly that they got the first news from shore. Jonathan spotted the signal immediately, having received instructions from Mrs. Bradley to keep a lookout for the lightship. The X signal was hoisted by the lightship, meaning “Stop carrying out your intentions and watch for my signals.” Jonathan responded by playing the devil’s tattoo on his klaxon, and it immediately became evident that the signal was intended for him, for the lightship, using a heliograph, flashed back the letter L, meaning “You should stop. I have something important to communicate.”

Jonathan reduced speed, and the cruiser drew in towards the lightship.

The communication, received in Morse Code “from Scotland Yard,” said the lightship keepers, was to the effect that the wanted persons were

known to have been off Yarmouth at half-past two, having put back from Cromer, and now were heading for the south.

“Trailing his coat,” said Jonathan.

“That means the Port of London Authority will have been warned,” said Mrs. Bradley, “but we’d better keep on their track in case they don’t put in at the Thames Estuary. It’s not an easy passage, with those short, choppy seas.”

“And even if they do,” said Jonathan, “there are plenty of hide-outs in Essex, if they choose to run in up Whitaker Channel and take the River Roach avoiding Burnham-on-Crouch.”

“Kitty!” said Alice, very pale.

“She’ll be all right,” said Laura, without the usual energetic conviction with which she was wont to pronounce this phrase.

“Of course she will,” said Jonathan cheerfully, but feeling guiltily conscious of his inexpressible gratitude that it was not Deborah in the hands of Mr. Os. Mrs. Bradley had told the girls, at last, who the quarry was.

“The only pity is,” he went on, “that some of us didn’t rumble the blighter sooner.”

He resumed his place at the controls, put the cruiser into reverse and edged her away from the lightship. Fortunately there was no dinghy to consider. The cruiser’s small boat was slung in davits, and was only in the way if you bumped into it accidentally.

They left three buoys to starboard off Caister Bank, and entered Yarmouth Roads, but passed the mouth of the river a mile or more out, and cruised on southwards towards Lowestoft.

“Two and a half hours’ start, roughly speaking,” said Jonathan.

“Wonder what sort of craft they’ve got? If they’re as fast as we are, we’re done.”

• CHAPTER 26 •

“Alice had been to the seaside once in her life, and had come to the general conclusion, that wherever you go on the English coast you find a number of bathing machines in the sea, some children digging in the sand with wooden spades, then a row of lodging houses, and behind them a railway station.”

—From *Alice in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll.

“One thing,” said Laura, who, in case night cruising should be necessary, had taken over whilst Jonathan went into the cabin after tea to get some sleep before darkness fell, “I suppose we’re not the only boat out looking for them?”

“By no means,” Mrs. Bradley answered. “But the description the lightship gave us of their cruiser might apply to hundreds of small pleasure craft, and the trouble is that they may have transferred onto something larger as soon as they were out of sight of Yarmouth. They certainly slipped through the police cordon there. Perhaps Mr. Os wore a disguise.”

“That’s a blow,” said Laura, speaking less philosophically than usual. “You don’t think anything will happen to old Kitty, do you?”

“No, I don’t. I’m the person they’re after. They knew I should follow as soon as I heard that she’d been kidnapped. That is the reason why they’ve left so broad a trail.”

“Yes, I see,” said Laura, seeing also that perhaps it would not prove difficult to get on Kitty’s track after all. The wind, which had continued to freshen, was now blowing so hard that all the waves showed white for as far as the eye could see. “Look!” said Laura suddenly. “There’s a boat ahead of us. Do you think it could be them?”

Mrs. Bradley, who carried glasses, trained them on the dancing speck which Laura’s keen eyes had singled out.

“It’s possible,” she said. “Can we travel any faster, do you think?”

For answer Laura gave the cruiser full throttle and they seemed to leap forward like a speedboat. For a second they hung above a deep depression of blue; the next instant down they plunged, dipping the nose of the cruiser, which shivered, small craft though she was, as though she suspected them of trying to break her back.

"Here," said Mrs. Bradley. "Let me take over. You take the glasses and see what you can see."

"I'm going on deck," said Laura, hauling the limp Alice along. "If we spot old K., I shall signal her to jump. After all, to get her back....She ought to be prepared to take a risk."

"There's a heavy sea running," said Mrs. Bradley, rather anxiously. She took the wheel.

The cruiser, bucketing badly under her half-skilled handling and the effect of its own speed, began to decrease, with exciting suddenness, the distance between it and its quarry.

"There's someone on deck," said Laura, putting her head in. "It *is* old Kitty, I think. Wonder if she *will* jump for it? Mind if I give her a hail? Either the boat ahead is in difficulties or else they're egging us on."

She entered the control cabin and played in Morse Code on the klaxon the initial letter of Kitty's name. *Dash dot dash* said the klaxon, and scarcely had it given its message when, through the glasses, Laura saw her friend wave both arms.

"She's got it," she said, putting the glasses back in their case. "Now for it." She glanced at the swiftly running sea, and pulled a life-jacket from its locker, but immediately thrust it back again.

"You're not going in?" said Mrs. Bradley; but knew the question was unnecessary, even at the moment of putting it. She half-closed the throttle, continued to slacken speed, and, as Alice and Laura dived, she headed the cruiser to port, the side on which they had gone in, so as to swing the screws away from the direction in which they were swimming.

Kitty, with what must have been enormous pluck and a very touching faith in her companions, flung up her arms and half-jumped, half-fell, off the cruiser they were pursuing. Mrs. Bradley, knowing that Laura and Alice were clear of the suck of the propellers, put her own cruiser into top speed and it dashed towards the quarry.

Within twenty yards of the struggling girl she eased off again, noting with considerable lessening of her first anxiety that Kitty, although she was

floundering badly, seemed able to keep herself afloat. The heavy seas, however, continually washed over her head. Mrs. Bradley blew a long blast on the klaxon, which effectively awoke her already disturbed and restless nephew. He came into the control cabin.

“Anything up?” he enquired. “Here!” He pointed forward. “What’s that in front?”

“Never mind. Get a life-belt overboard,” said his aunt. “Get Deborah to help you.”

“No. You two handle the rescue work. Give me the controls,” said he. “It’s no joke manoeuvring for ‘Man Overboard’ in a sea running like this.”

He was on his own ground, and Mrs. Bradley did not dream of arguing. She went up on deck with Deborah.

“Mind you don’t go overboard,” she said.

The rescue itself, although difficult, was not particularly exciting. Laura got to Kitty and gave her the fourth method of assistance, which is that rendered to an exhausted but not terrified swimmer. It consisted in Kitty’s lying on her back and taking Laura by the short sleeves of the shirt, and in Laura’s swimming breast-stroke towards the cruiser.

The cockle-shell antics of the latter, however, with scarcely any way on her in such a rolling sea, however diverting they might have been to watch, were not of the most reliable assistance to the swimmers, although Jonathan did everything he could. Alice, coming up shortly after Laura had garnered Kitty, swam alongside, ready to render assistance if any should be required. But Laura, a host in herself when it came to swimming, got Kitty up to the cruiser.

Jonathan had cut out the engine for fear of suction from the screws, and pooping seas began to break over the cruiser, to the extreme danger of the two rescuers on deck.

What control could be exercised over the cruiser’s flirtations with the sea was exercised by Jonathan, but there was very little he could do. Unless the swimmers were to be kept continually changing their direction—a risk which could not be run for fear of exhausting the three girls—he could not keep the cruiser’s head to the seas.

“All right?” said Mrs. Bradley, at last.

“Yes,” shouted Alice, leaping like a porpoise to get her head well up.

“Right. Come to it at *When*.”

“All right.”

“When!” She flung out the life-belt at the opportune moment, and as the cruiser sank to a piece of water, which flattened between two rollers, the trained body and mind of the excellent Alice responded to the word of command and the dexterous flight of the apparatus, which landed beside her. In a moment she was on board, with a heave and a roll, which would have capsized a small boat, but which the stout cruiser bore with equanimity. The unfortunate Kitty, on her back with Laura above her, was by this time feeling half-drowned, and Jonathan, himself a powerful swimmer, realised this. There was little he could do beyond what he had done already by cutting out the engine and using the way already on the vessel. Even with all the handicaps, however, his seamanship and judgment proved unexceptionable, and the girls were hauled safely aboard. The cruiser, although her deck was awash during some of the tricky manoeuvres, responded with spirit to the return to life to her engines, and by the time Mrs. Bradley had given artificial respiration to Kitty, who seemed to be “almost full of water,” as Laura observed, and Deborah had made some strong tea into which Mrs. Bradley dashed whiskey, the cruiser was again on her course.

Mrs. Bradley wrung water out of her clothes (for she and Deborah were, by this time, almost as wet as the girls) and went into the cabin to change, for she, alone of the party, had brought a spare set of clothes.

Kitty seemed little the worse for her gallant escape from captivity. Alice and Laura, it proved, had “rather enjoyed the swim.” Fortunately the two rescuers had put off shoes and slacks before they went in, and their sweaters and College blazers were in the cabin.

Kitty and Deborah were not so lucky, and had to go to bed in the cabin, as the only available garments were Jonathan’s raincoat and an extra sportscoat belonging to Mrs. Bradley. However, after having the tea, Kitty soon went off to sleep. The sun was beginning to decline, and the boat they were chasing was out of sight.

At dusk the lights were put on. The wind had dropped with the sunset, but Laura, who proved to be weather-wise, said that it was a false lull, and that they could look for it to blow later on. For fear this prophecy should prove true, Mrs. Bradley was inclined to put in to port and leave the rest of the chase to the police.

Jonathan, who had had an hour or two of sleep, squeezed tightly on one bunk with his wife to keep her warm (as she put it), took over the

controls just before darkness came, and was in emphatic agreement. He, too, agreed that the weather was not likely to improve. The sea, in fact, had not died down at all, although the wind had dropped. He observed that they were slightly off their course, but should be within view of Orford Ness very shortly.

As he spoke, the light on Orford Ness came in view, for, although for some time the cruiser had been within its range, it had only at that moment begun to function. A second light, flashing red and green, also began its night's work, and helped them to check their position.

"Try Felixstowe, I think," suggested Jonathan. "It's a good deep channel alongside Bawdsey Bank, and it's pretty well buoyed all the way in after that. Ten to one that's where they'll make for, unless they try Harwich, and can get a boat across to Holland."

"I doubt whether they'll try either," said Mrs. Bradley, "with Pirberry watching every port, and with me still at large and unharmed," she added with a chuckle.

"Well, they'll never risk going on, if they know the first thing about the weather," Jonathan observed, "and if they want you they know where you are."

"We don't know yet how many are on board with Mr. Os," said Mrs. Bradley. "They may override him, much as he dislikes me, and make him go on running. Drowning must be preferred to hanging, any day."

Her nephew thought this statement open to argument, if not to downright contradiction, but refused to be controversial, merely observing that their own course of action was clear. They must certainly put the girls ashore as soon as they could, now that Kitty was safe and sound. He added that he hoped the little pests would stay put for once, forgetting that this time the adventure was scarcely of their seeking.

The channel into Felixstowe and Harwich was pretty well lighted. They made the River Orwell, and lay for the night off Pinmill, in two and a quarter fathoms. A tribute to the excellence of the police information was a visit which was paid to them, ten minutes after they had moored, by the Essex constabulary, which, represented by a sergeant and three constables, came up in a launch and demanded to know their names and business.

Mrs. Bradley, it appeared, had been described carefully and well, for the production by her papers of identification provided by the thoughtful Mr. Pirberry scarcely seemed to be necessary. To the disgust of Laura

(although to Kitty's and Alice's relief) arrangements were made whereby Mrs. Bradley was to accompany the three girls to the police station at Harwich, and afterwards to a hotel. At the last moment, however, it occurred to Laura that Kitty had no clothes dry enough to put on, and could scarcely be expected to attend at the police station merely in a sportscoat covered by a raincoat. Deborah, most fortunately, was not concerned in the matter, for she had nothing on at all.

The problem was solved by the sergeant, a young and pleasant man, who said that his wife would be only too glad to lend the young lady some clothes, and added the valuable information that he was a Pinmill man himself, and wouldn't be five minutes gone.

He was a quarter of an hour, but brought his wife back with him, and, when she saw the girls, she offered to have them for the night, informing her husband roundly that he was not going to drag them to any police station at that hour. He could question them in his own home, and then they could have supper with her and go to bed. They looked tired to death, she added, kindly but erroneously.

Mrs. Bradley glanced at her nephew. He raised his eyebrows, and nodded. The result of this wordless collaboration was that, when the police and the girls had gone, and Deborah, wrapped in blankets, was fast asleep in the cabin, Jonathan started up the engine and gently backed the cruiser away from her moorings.

Turning her was tricky work in the dark, although, fortunately, at Pinmill, there was plenty of room. Every moment, nevertheless, they expected (and deserved, said Jonathan, later) to run aground; but luck was with them, and they were able to steer downstream. It was, as Jonathan pointed out, the most idiotic manoeuvre, because the tide, although almost full, was not due to turn for at least another hour, and to beat out to sea under such conditions was asking for more trouble than, actually, they got.

It was when they had left the lights which marked the conjunction of the river-mouths of the Orwell and the Stour, and were beginning to find the full, unbroken force of the wind, which had got up again at great pressure, that their stowaway crawled out from under the port-side bunk, and announced that she "could just about manage a biscuit," if nobody minded.

Jonathan said he was dashed, but Mrs. Bradley betrayed no surprise whatever, and confessed afterwards that she had not felt any. Neither she nor her nephew was sorry to see Laura. It was more than useful to have a

fourth hand on board. Watches were hastily arranged. Jonathan and Laura were to take the first three hours, Jonathan and his aunt the next three, and that would leave Laura and Mrs. Bradley in charge as daylight came. As no one could spare any clothes for Deborah, she was left out of these arrangements.

The general agreement was that they should not attempt the Thames Estuary, but should run on south, put in at the first port they could reach after eight o'clock in the morning for information, and then be guided by this information as to their further course of action. In round terms, said Mrs. Bradley, grinning, they were on a pleasure trip, and nothing else mattered for a time.

A pleasure trip it certainly was not, at first. The wind was blowing strongly from the southeast. They ran right out to Cork Hole first, and that short passage gave them the worst of the weather, for no amount of extra speed could eliminate the effects of the strong sea and the wind.

Left in the control cabin with Laura, Jonathan marked the chart in pencil. Steering had to be by compass, and allowance had to be made for tide drift as well as for the wind, particularly in so comparatively small a vessel. Much of the time it was not safe to run direct, and a zigzag course had to be followed, to avoid seas coming beam-on.

They checked with the flashes from the buoy by Goldmer Gat, again from Longsand Head, set course for Kentish Knock, and dropped down past the Elbow. From here they could check position again by the North Foreland Light with its red and white flashes every twenty seconds. South they went still, past Ramsgate and through the Small Downs past Deal and so through the Straits of Dover to the curve of the south coast into the English Channel.

The night passed quite without incident. Laura took over the controls for part of the time, and changed over with Mrs. Bradley, to get some sleep, at just after one in the morning. Occasionally they saw the lights of ships, but none of these came near, and the wind died down by the morning, although from midnight until almost four o'clock none but the best of sailors would have felt at all happy on the cruiser.

At dawn they were just off Folkestone, having travelled three times (or more) the distance marked on the chart. This was due to the heavy seas, which necessitated constant tacking.

“Done pretty well,” said Jonathan, going off to the cabin to turn in, having plotted the course with Laura for heading towards Southampton.

The dawn turned to gold from its grey. Laura edged in towards the shore. She took bearings, but steered by the land, keeping far enough out to avoid any trouble round headlands. Mrs. Bradley, beside her in the control cabin, took over the steering at five. The cruise was proving a pleasure trip after all. Laura, relieved of responsibility, went into the cabin where the lovely Deborah, very disconsolate and bored, was sitting, wrapped in her blanket, on the bunk. Laura grinned.

“Here,” she said, beginning to strip off her clothes. “I’m going to turn in for a bit. You can have these if you like. Give ’em a bit of a shake to air them; they’ll be a bit big for you, I daresay, but you’re welcome.”

In the end it was decided to make for Lymington. It was a small place, but it was easy enough, as Mrs. Bradley pointed out, to use the telephone if there was no news of the fugitives to be had in Lymington itself.

“Or we might make Cowes,” said Jonathan, who had not only taken less than his allotted time in his berth, but had made tea and cooked eggs and bacon for breakfast. He smiled at his wife, who, with Laura’s slacks belted firmly and Laura’s sweater with its sleeves rolled up, was looking as lovely as the morning.

It was a sweet run in to Lymington, although it was almost lunchtime when they reached it. The morning papers had not the news they wanted to hear, and a telephone call to police headquarters at Southampton brought nothing, either. Every police station in the kingdom had the description of Mr. Os but, so far, with no result.

“Interesting,” said Mrs. Bradley. “Do you think they can still be at sea?”

“If they can be so can we,” said her nephew. “Just say the word, and we’ll be off. It’s a grand day for cruising.”

“Bother them!” said Mrs. Bradley roundly. “Why should we trouble? Let’s cruise round the Isle of Wight. We have earned some fun.”

“What’s the matter with getting back to Yarmouth?” suggested Jonathan. “I can berth this outfit there and run her back to Hull when we’re sure we’ve done with her. To hell with Mr. Os. If he wants us he can come and look for us. That is, if the police don’t get him first.”

So Mrs. Bradley and Laura went ashore at Southampton to buy Deborah some clothes, as her own were not yet dry, and while they were

ashore they went into a post-office and Mrs. Bradley telephoned Pirberry at Norwich. He was not there himself to take the call, but the superintendent answered it.

“They must have changed course in the darkness, ma’am,” he reported. “They were spotted off Yarmouth Roads this afternoon by a fishing boat. At least, we think it must be them. Mr. Pirberry, that’s on the trail now.”

The run back to Yarmouth was postponed until the morning, and then was made in fine and only moderately breezy weather, and the cruiser lay up for the night in the mouth of the river, where there was depth to take her. Next day Mrs. Bradley and the two girls remained on board whilst Jonathan went to get *O’Reilly* and bring her along to the coast.

He brought a message, too, which had been left on board her. It was dated for the previous day.

“Well done,” it said. “Stick to it. But we’ll get you yet, you old pterodactyl. If we swing, we’ll swing for something worthwhile.”

“Well, that’s very civil and complimentary,” said Mrs. Bradley. “I am inclined to hope that Mr. Pirberry is second in the field and that we are first. Let us go to Voley Water tomorrow. Have you any objection, my dear Laura?”

As Laura did not know the name of the small Broad beside which they had found the body in the bungalow, the question meant little to her. So, in the sunshine of the following day, *O’Reilly* chugged gently up the River Bure and passed Stokesby Old Windmill and the conjunction of Muck Fleet with the main stream. Here it turned northwards, then west under the Wey Bridge, northwards again toward Thurne Mouth, and then once more to the west.

The sun was high and the day was at its hottest by the time they passed Saint Benet’s Abbey and were following the river past the lakes, Broads, and staithes of Ranworth Marshes. Then still up-river they went, avoiding the turning to Ranworth Broad, until at last they came to the staithe, discovered by the girls, which led to Voley Water.

Here in the middle of the Broad the cruiser was brought to rest. Laura, from her seat on the cabin roof, looked round about her at the tiny Broad. Nothing seemed changed. The woods, the bright green marshes, the placid water of the second entrance to the Broad with its screen of rushes, were

just as she had first seen them before any horrors were known, and when the destruction of the peace was still undreamed-of.

Mrs. Bradley came to her and spoke quietly.

"If Mr. Os comes, and come he will," she said, "you must get below as soon as I give the word."

Jonathan had left the cockpit and now came up to seat himself beside her, and Deborah followed.

"By the way," he said, "who is Mr. Bleriot?"

"Another brother, I imagine," Mrs. Bradley replied. "If my inferences are correct, he chose to hide his surname in the second half of his Christian name. Mr. Os was bolder; mistakenly, as it turns out."

"When did you first suspect him?" Deborah enquired. "Was it just the name?"

"Well, that helped, of course, particularly as, apart from Ferdinand, only someone connected with the police could have known that I helped in the Bone case. Then I do know that my suspicions took definite shape when I saw one of his men trailing the friend of Martha Huzy who came to bring me a message on board. It seemed very odd to me that Mr. Os should have known of this man and had him trailed without saying a word to me about him. More peculiar still, I thought, was his action in telephoning the hotel at Stalham the first time I went to Worstead, to ask my chauffeur whether he knew where I was. As he himself knew perfectly well where I was, I concluded that he had decided to send George to find my dead body. The dart tipped with curare, you remember. The interesting thing about curare, of course," she went on, "is that it was the one poison which corresponded most closely with witchcraft killings. It is prepared, as you probably know, with charms and spells by the natives who manufacture it to make their poisoned arrows, and is regarded by them as symbolic of magic power."

"If you knew all this, though," said Jonathan, "why didn't you tip off Pirberry and have Os arrested for the murders?"

"Because he had made the challenge a personal one. I am becoming old and bored. I accepted the challenge in the spirit in which I imagined it had been offered—"

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," said Laura solemnly, "as they thought about the brother who got sent to Broadmoor, I suppose."

"These vendettas are always a mistake," said Mrs. Bradley. "The eldest brother was convicted, as well he deserved to be. He was found

Guilty but Insane. It wasn't true. As Ferdinand surmised, he was perfectly sane, and was lucky not to be hanged."

"And is Os sane?" asked Jonathan.

"I hope the jury will think so."

"Then was it Mr. Os who murdered the woman we found in the bungalow?" asked Laura.

"Morally, yes. Actually, she committed suicide. These women are extremely superstitious. Mr. Os had "hexed" her, I think, at the infamous club. The toad and the pentagram proved what had been happening to her.

"There was one more thing. Mr. Os made his first slip when he wrote me an anonymous letter *after* the death of the second brother. However much he wanted me in Norfolk, I cannot help thinking that it was a mistake to have had the Norwich postmark on the envelope. As soon as I heard that Amos Bleriot had gone to Norwich I began to put two and two together, with the consequence that I felt as suspicious in Norwich and its environs as I should have felt in a cage of snakes.

"The second body, that placed in the cabin of the houseboat, was that of the victim of a ritual murder in Worstead. I can well imagine," she added, "that the temptation offered by all those stretched Worstead throats to the officiating priest of the mysteries must have been overwhelming. That priest, as we know, was Amos Bleriot. I asked Mr. Os to give me the list of young girls in his district who had been missing from their homes. The Black Mass cannot be said except a virgin take part in the ceremony. He neglected to provide such a list. That is a small point, of course, but it served to confirm my suspicions. Such girls are not easy to procure, but in the ceremony of the Black Mass, and apparently in the variant of it practised by Amos Bleriot, they are essential. The consecrated wafer—well, the Satanists can always get someone to attend the true Mass, his tongue coated with alum, to bring back the portion they require. Prostitutes for acolytes are also fairly easy to engage, since I presume they merely ask payment for their services. As for an unfrocked priest—another essential for the Black Mass—I imagine we shall discover that Copley happens to be one. Rather interesting, that. You will remember, Jonathan, that the service we attended with such gratifying results in Worstead was not the Black Mass. Copley, I suppose, could not be present for fear of being trailed by Mr. Pirberry. But the virgins are the difficulty usually, and the Black Mass

can no more be performed without a virgin lying on the altar than without an unfrocked priest to conduct the ceremonies.”

“But what do they get out of it all?” demanded Laura. “Is it really such fun, just to mock at religion like that? It seems pretty silly to me.”

“You had better ask Mr. Os what the satisfaction is,” answered Mrs. Bradley. “But I think I can give you his reply. He will say that it is very interesting to a certain type of mind, and that Satanism is as old as the Church itself. He will probably suggest that you look at the world around you. Is it not given almost wholly over to Satan? Why deny the evidence of your own senses? Sin and the wicked flourish. Who ever heard of goodness and the saints flourishing? The sheer fact is, he will tell you, that they do not.”

“Well,” said Laura, bluntly, “when we get him I shouldn’t think that he will be flourishing, either.”

“Too true,” agreed Jonathan, eyeing the low green shore. “But his law-breaking still has to be proved. You will not find it easy to make out a case against him.”

“Who killed Elias Bennett?” asked Mrs. Bradley. Jonathan looked slightly astonished.

“You don’t expect to prove Os did that?” he enquired.

Mrs. Bradley shook her head.

“I don’t. But Mr. Pirberry may be able to,” she answered, “particularly as he will have the enthusiastic assistance of the superintendent and the badly bamboozled Chief Constable. But I do expect to be able to prove that he helped to murder the woman who was represented to be Romance Copley.”

“But I thought it was fairly certain that Copley himself murdered that woman.”

“Mr. Os had guilty knowledge of the affair, at any rate,” said Mrs. Bradley. “There is one curious little point about that murder. You see, before witnesses—a stupid slip, but murderers do make stupid slips—Mr. Os reported the death of Romance Copley—or rather, of her deputy—*before that death occurred*. I pointed this out to Mr. Pirberry at the time, and we agreed that it was the most extraordinary case of second sight we had ever known.” She cackled harshly.

“Well, I’m damned!” said Jonathan. “Something went wrong with their time-scheme, I suppose?”

“Another odd thing,” Mrs. Bradley went on, “was in connection with that deck-chair which I took from the houseboat. When Mr. Pirberry, at my request, got an expert from Scotland Yard to go over it for fingerprints, he made the extraordinary discovery that there were none on it.”

“But—” exclaimed Jonathan and Deborah together.

“I know. There should have been those of the houseboat people themselves, mine, those of my chauffeur George, and possibly there were others. All had been cleaned off the wooden frame.”

“Including those of the murderer,” said Laura.

“Well,” said Mrs. Bradley, “the inference is that Mr. Os had left his own prints on that deck-chair when they brought the body on board—or thought he might have done—and that it was too dangerous to leave them on, since other and innocent prints had been superimposed on his when the chair was, through my officiousness, brought to the police station.”

“Pardon me for butting in,” said Jonathan, “but do I see aright?” He jerked his head towards the second entrance of the Broad, by which a small yacht, with the light breeze on its port quarter, was making its way towards them.

What he did see was that this question was unnecessary. Mrs. Bradley grinned at him like a hungry pike, and for one startled second he felt sorry for Mr. Os. Then he said:

“What’s the programme? I suppose he’s got a gun? What about Laura and Deb? Do we batten them down under hatches?”

Mrs. Bradley did not give a direct reply to her nephew’s questions.

“Down below, Laura,” she said. “Tell Deborah not to come up until she gets word.”

“But it isn’t Mr. Os,” said Laura. However, she slid obediently down the ladder into the galley where Deborah was making lemonade. She gave Mrs. Bradley’s message, and then went into the cabin and began to take off her clothes.

O’Reilly swung a little at anchor and was head-on to the intruders when Laura slipped over the stern and entered the water. Hidden from the yacht by the cruiser’s hull, she swam to land and soon was among the trees.

On deck Jonathan shaded his eyes.

“It’s Copley, and he’s got a gun,” he said.

“Keep in cover behind the cabin top,” said his aunt. “I have the impression that he is not the only person on board.”

Suddenly Copley hailed them.

“You have five minutes,” he said. Mrs. Bradley cackled and said that she would allow him the same amount of grace. But almost as soon as she had spoken, over the stern of his yacht swarmed a naked figure. It rose behind Copley and smote him on the base of the skull. He did not even cry out, but slithered in a heap to the side, over which vengeful Aphrodite, in the person of Laura Menzies, thrust him in a stevedore fashion which his temporarily inanimate body could not resist.

He was not, however, born to be drowned. Poising herself for a second against the dip and curtesy of the yacht, Laura dived in after him just as Mr. Os came up out of the cabin. Mrs. Bradley picked the revolver out of the hand of Mr. Os with her first shot, and his weapon fell overboard. Then Laura appeared, with the still unconscious Edgar Copley, and needed no assistance until Jonathan leant over the side to grab her victim’s collar to allow her to scramble aboard.

“Lost my cosh in the water. Bet it’s gone into the mud,” she said regretfully. Jonathan started up the cruiser as soon as they could lift anchor, to close in on the yacht and take Mr. Os.

The light breeze, which had served the yacht so well in bringing her onto the Broad now died away, as though the winds themselves were for once on the side of the angels. But then was observed a strange thing, for Mr. Os was seen to stand squarely on deck and invoke the breathless heavens with his cap, turning it for the wind which would take the yacht out of the Broad by way of the second staithe.

“Shades of King Erik of Sweden!” cried Mrs. Bradley.* “He’s setting his cap for a wind!”

“More witchcraft?” asked Jonathan, and even as he spoke there sprang up an astonishing freak wind, which bent the trees on shore and bellied the sails of the yacht and filled the quiet Broad with sound.

Off went Os with the wind right aft, and gybed to bring the yacht round for the only way of escape. The yacht’s boom swung across, for he could not wait for a lull, and then the affronted powers of light were avenged on the representative of darkness, for the sudden change was too much for the yacht’s equilibrium and in a second she had capsized, and her sails were flat on the water.

As suddenly as it had risen the freakish wind died down. They got Mr. Os at last, but he was dead. His cap floated by and came to the side of the

cruiser. Mrs. Bradley dropped into it the worsted viper she had made, and then took the boathook, and thrust the cap of darkness under the water.

*“King Erik of Sweden was in his time held second to none in the magical arts; and he was so familiar with the evil spirits whom he worshipped, that what way so ever he turned his cap, the wind would presently blow that way.”—*Olaus Magnus*

About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and History, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.